

TO GREECE

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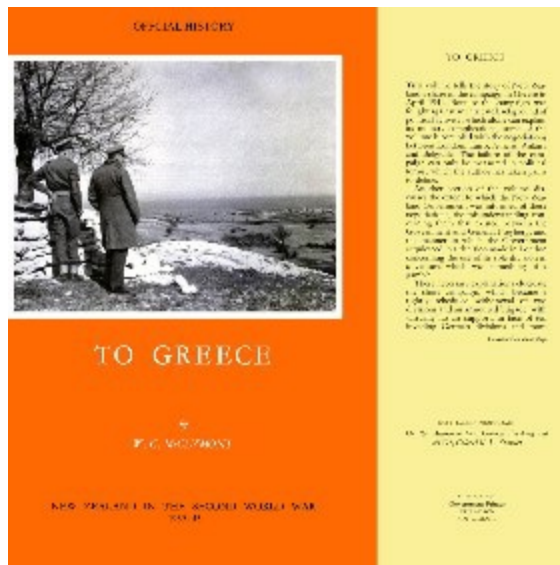
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TO GREECE

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TO GREECE

[TITLE PAGE]

*Official History of New Zealand
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1939–45*

The authors of the volumes in this series of histories prepared under the supervision of the **War History Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs have been given full access to official documents. They and the Editor-in-Chief are responsible for the statements made and the views expressed by them.**

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TO GREECE
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Mount Olympus, a post-war photograph

Mount Olympus, a post-war photograph

TO GREECE

[TITLE PAGE]

*Official History of New Zealand
in the Second World War 1939–45*

TO GREECE

W. G. McCLYMONT

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TO GREECE

PREFACE

Preface

THIS volume deals with the formation of **2 NZEF**, with the movements and experiences of its brigade groups before they assembled in Egypt, and finally with the operations of the New Zealand Division in **Greece**. The central theme has always been the history of the fighting units, but it has often been necessary to explain and discuss Government policy, the decisions of the senior commanders and the problems of Commonwealth co-operation. For the vital issues of this period of the war were often political as well as strategic.

Every effort has been made by the **War History Branch** of the Department of Internal Affairs to collect the necessary information. Many records were destroyed in **Greece** or, as sometimes happened, were taken off only to be lost or destroyed during the campaign in Crete. Reports were afterwards prepared in Egypt but they could not always be exact or complete. Many who fought in **Greece** had been killed or made prisoners of war in **Crete**; others who could have explained certain vague statements were later killed in North Africa. To establish the facts and to check the conclusions, the manuscript, or parts of it, has been read by many participants in the campaign, but it is possible that due attention has not been given to certain incidents. Nor was it always possible for me to record the names of those who took a prominent part in several important actions. At Kalamata, for example, the men who advanced along the waterfront were assembled in the dark and under the command of any natural leader who happened to be available. Twelve hours later the majority of them were prisoners of war. An apology is therefore offered to those whose work would otherwise have been described with more accuracy and in greater detail.

The officers and men who answered questions and checked sections of this narrative are so numerous that I cannot name them all. I am,

however, very grateful for the most generous manner in which they assisted me. I wish, particularly, to acknowledge the help I have received from **Lieutenant-General Lord Freyberg**, the late **Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger**, Major-General Sir Harold Barrowclough, Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Puttick and Major-Generals Sir Keith Stewart, Sir William Gentry, and C. E. Weir.

I must also acknowledge how much I owe to the patience and co-operation of the Editor-in-Chief, **Brigadier M. C. Fairbrother**, and his staff, in particular to the assistance given to me by Mr I. McL. Wards, whose narrative was the basis for the Greek section of this volume.

Chapters 1– 5 owe much to the researches of **Mr W. A. Glue**, who also prepared this volume for publication. The majority of the German documents quoted in the text were translated by Mr W. D. Dawson. Mr A. E. Monaghan, when Archivist, answered numerous letters, searched his files for papers and, by examining each personal card in Base Records, prepared the final list of casualties. His successor, **Mr R. L. Kay**, has been equally helpful and considerate, and I am also grateful to Mrs W. G. Woodward for her index.

I am also indebted to Mr A. D. McIntosh of the Department of External Affairs, **Wellington**; to Mr D. G. Esplin and Dr Angus Ross of the University of Otago; and to the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department.

Overseas there are many to whom thanks must be expressed for their always willing assistance. In Australia there is Mr Gavin Long, the Australian Official Historian. In Britain there are Major-General I. S. O. Playfair, Brigadier H. B. Latham and Professor Sir James Butler of the Historical Section of the Cabinet Office; Lieutenant-Colonel E. E. Rich, who prepared for the War Office the narrative on the campaign in **Greece**; and the officers who supplied information about the action at **Kalamata**: Lieutenant-Colonel Basil Carey, 3 Royal Tank Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel H. Geddes, Royal Army Service Corps, and Major G. A. F. Kennard, **Shropshire Yeomanry**.

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CHAPTER 1 – THE FIRST ECHELON

CHAPTER 1

The First Echelon

AT dawn on 1 September 1939 the *Luftwaffe* attacked the Polish airfields and the *Wehrmacht* crossed the Polish border. That day, and again on 3 September, the British Government asked **Germany** for immediate assurances that her aggressive action would be suspended and her troops withdrawn from Polish territory. Unless this was done **Britain** would, without hesitation, fulfil her obligations to **Poland**. At the same time the Dominions, warned that **Britain** was preparing for war, were asked to co-operate and to take precautionary measures.

This was a necessary procedure. In 1914 it had been natural to think that because **Britain** was at war the rest of the Empire was at war. In 1939 the Dominions, as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations, 'in no way subordinate one to another', were free to act as they individually thought fit. ¹ In New Zealand's case the Government entirely concurred with, and warmly endorsed, what was virtually the issue of an ultimatum.

Some precautionary measures had already been taken. On 30 August No. 1 Platoon, A Company, a small detachment of two officers and thirty other ranks from the **Regular Force**, had been sent in HMS *Leander* to garrison **Fanning Island**, a coral atoll 3° 54' north of the Equator and an important trans- **Pacific** cable station. The Government now went further. All Regular reservists and some of the Special Reserve (Class 2) ² were mobilised, the coastal defences were manned and vital points placed under guard.

When no reply was received from **Germany** it was announced in a *New Zealand Gazette* Extraordinary that 'a state of war ... existed from 9.30 p.m. New Zealand Standard Time on the third day of September 1939.' This made the Dominion's proclamation simultaneous with that of the **United Kingdom**. It was forwarded to the German Government by the United States Ambassador in **Berlin**. ³

¹ New Zealand declared war on **Germany** on 3 September; South Africa on 6 September; **Canada** on 10 September. **Australia** on 3 September stated: 'Great Britain has declared war ... **Australia** is also at war'

² Ex-Regulars and returned soldiers, aged 35 to 55.

³ There is no copy of this note, which is the first declaration of war made by New Zealand as an independent member of the Commonwealth. The greater part of the archives of the United States Embassy in **Berlin** was destroyed by fire during the war.

The despatch to **London** stated that 'His Majesty's Government in New Zealand desire immediately to associate themselves with His Majesty's Government in the **United Kingdom** in honouring their pledged word. They entirely concur with the action taken, which they regard as inevitably forced upon the British Commonwealth if the cause of justice, freedom and democracy is to endure in this world.... The New Zealand Government wish to offer to the British Government the fullest assurance of all possible support. They are convinced that the step that has been taken will meet with the approval of the people of this Dominion, and they will in due course give the fullest consideration to any suggestion of the British Government as to the method, or methods, by which this Dominion can best assist in the common cause.' ¹

So far as land forces were concerned, the first step was the decision by Cabinet on 6 September to mobilise 6600 men, a Special Force for service within and without New Zealand. This was the first echelon of what from 12 December 1939 was known as 2 New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Enlistment would be entirely voluntary and would be restricted according to age. Other ranks and non-commissioned officers had to be between the ages of 21 and 35 years, subalterns under 30, captains under 35, majors under 40 and lieutenant-colonels under 45 years.

The forces from which these recruits could be drawn were not relatively as strong as those which were available in 1914 when there was a system of compulsory training. There were the Regular Force and the **Territorial Force**, both under the control of the Army Board.² But in actual practice the former was only a small instructional and administrative staff of 100 officers and 478 other ranks. The latter, though it was organised to protect the main ports and to provide a field force that could be expanded in time of war, was not based upon any system of compulsory training. The compulsory clauses of the Defence Act 1909 had been suspended in 1930, and the **Territorial Force** when re-established in 1932 had been based upon a system of voluntary enlistment. In 1930 there had been 17,500 trainees; in 1939 under the voluntary scheme there were on 31 March only 778 officers and 9586 other ranks. This was disappointing, but the system did at least provide the essentials for a scheme of training, even if its successful application was dependent upon the patriotic services of a small number of officers

¹ The Governor-General of New Zealand to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 4 Sep 1939 (Despatched 1.55 a.m.).

² The Minister of Defence, the Chief of the General Staff, the Adjutant-General, the Quartermaster-General, the Army Secretary. Up to 13 May 1939 the appointments of Adjutant-General and Quartermaster-General had been combined in the one appointment of Adjutant and Quartermaster-General.

and non-commissioned officers, many of whom had served in the First World War. Without them there would have been no **Territorial Force**; without the **Territorial Force** it would have been impossible to organise the Expeditionary Force in any reasonable length of time.

There was one other training cadre, the **Territorial Special Reserve** which had been formed in 1937. Single men between the ages of 18 and 30 had the opportunity of enlisting for five months' military training, during which time facilities would also be provided for vocational

training. They were afterwards given the opportunity to join the **Regular Force** or be posted to Territorial units. In 1939, however, there were only 374 other ranks in this unit.

These groups with their different standards of training were allowed for when more detailed plans were prepared. Army Headquarters gave preference to single men in the following order: serving members of the **Territorial Force**; members of the infantry section of the **Special Reserve**; members of Class I ¹ of the **National Military Reserve**; other single men with or without military experience. The period of training was to be for a maximum of three months in special camps. If their services were not required at the end of this period, all ranks would be granted leave without pay and allowed to return to their civil occupations until called up again. Enlistment would be for the duration of the war and twelve months thereafter or until lawfully discharged.

At 9 a.m. on Tuesday 12 September the recruiting offices were opened, and when the doors closed that night 5419 men had enlisted. Thereafter the figures were rather disappointing, no doubt because of uncertainty as to the role of the **Special Force**, but by 5 October, when the **First Echelon** was assembling, the total was 14,983. Even so, it was difficult to bring the new units up to strength and quite unnecessary to have any system of priority, for the somewhat high medical standards had already caused many rejections. Consequently on 11 April 1940 the age limit for other ranks was raised to 40 years and by May the justice of conscription ² was being hotly debated throughout the country.

To prevent these enlistments from upsetting the economic structure of the Dominion, the **National Service Department** was established with a **Manpower Committee** of the **Department of Industries and Commerce**. It drew up a **Schedule of Reserved Occupations**, which was afterwards replaced by the **Schedule of Important Occupations**. The **Social Security Department** compiled

¹ Men with not less than two years' Territorial training.

a register of every male resident in the Dominion over the age of sixteen, and the placement officers of the Department of Labour scrutinised the lists of volunteers and recommended that the military service of certain essential workers be postponed. Married men with more than two children, men engaged in primary industries, and those who were essential in secondary industries were withdrawn from the Special Force. In this way it was intended that the manpower of the Dominion should be conserved and directed into those industries essential for the successful prosecution of the war.

Meanwhile, throughout September, the British and New Zealand Governments had been discussing the best means by which the land forces of the Dominion could co-operate in the common cause. They decided that New Zealand should raise a division, ¹ as in 1914–18, and despatch it for operations overseas wherever it could be employed most usefully. Plans were therefore made for the first echelon ² of this division to enter camp on 3 October, for the second echelon to assemble two months later, and for the third echelon to be called up another two months later. Within eight months there would be a complete division. But it was doubtful if there was in New Zealand the necessary equipment for training in mechanised warfare. And there was also the question whether troops in training should be held in the Dominion until the Division was complete, or whether they should be sent overseas as and when the echelons became available.

Any action by New Zealand was, moreover, governed by the attitude of **Japan**. Until that country played her first card no confident decision could be made. If she remained neutral and friendly then a force could be sent to serve in **France**, or perhaps to replace British troops in **India**, **Burma** or **Singapore**. On the other hand, if **Japan** maintained 'an attitude of reserve' towards the democratic powers it would be most unwise to send an expedition outside the **Pacific** area. This was the

preliminary decision in September 1939. The problem could be studied again when the Division or one of its echelons had completed its training.

In the meantime the Division would be organised and trained for service overseas. The first echelon would consist of some staff for an overseas base, part of **Divisional Headquarters** and one infantry brigade group. The second echelon would have the rest

¹ The *Gazette* of 11 January 1940 revoked the Special Force Emergency Regulation. That formation became part of the Expeditionary Force provided for by the Expeditionary Force Regulations of 11 January 1940 under the Defence Act 1909.

² The term 'echelon' was first used by Army Headquarters on 28 August 1939. Although HQ **2 NZEF, Middle East**, announced on 23 September 1940 that the title would in future be 'contingent', the term remained in official use in New Zealand and in everyday conversation by all ranks in the **Middle East**.

of **Divisional Headquarters** and another infantry brigade group. The third echelon would be the remaining brigade group. Each brigade was to be drawn in approximately equal proportions from the three military districts. In 4 Infantry Brigade, for example, 18 Battalion came from the Northern (**Auckland**), 19 Battalion from the Central (**Wellington**) and 20 Battalion from the Southern (**South Island**) Military District.

The **First Echelon** was assembled and organised at **Ngaruawahia, Trentham** and **Burnham**. ¹ On 27 September courses began for officers and non-commissioned officers. The main drafts marched in on 3 October and the battalions were organised with members of the **Regular Force** as adjutants, regimental sergeants-major or company sergeants-major.

The nomenclature of these units had presented an unexpected problem of army organisation and regimental tradition. The major

formations had not been difficult to number. First New Zealand Division with its three infantry brigades was for home defence. The formation to go overseas would, therefore, be 2 New Zealand Division with 4, 5 and 6 Brigades. ²

With the smaller units it was not so simple. The Adjutant- General, Colonel Mead, ³ wished to avoid the duplication of numbers held by earlier or existing units. So with a deplorable disregard for tradition it was decided that the regimental numbers should follow on after those of the Territorial Force. As there were seventeen Territorial infantry regiments in existence or in suspension, the numbering of the Expeditionary Force battalions started with 18 Battalion; there had been a 3 Field Regiment so the new artillery units began with 4 Field Regiment; and in succession to 4 Field Company, New Zealand Engineers, came 5 Field Park Company.

At this stage, in addition to the First Echelon, units were also being organised from the Maori volunteers and from the New Zealanders in Britain. Two days after the declaration of war the Maori members of Parliament had suggested that the race should have its own unit

¹ **Papakura:** 18 Bn (from 7 November), Div Amn Coy, 4 Res MT Coy (details). **Ngaruawahia:** Div Cav Regt (13 LAD attached), HQ Div Arty (details), 4 Fd Regt (9 LAD attached), HQ NZE (details), 5 Fd Pk Coy (10 LAD attached), 6 Fd Coy. **Trentham:** HQ NZ Div (details), Div Int Sec, Div Sigs (14 LAD attached), HQ 4 Inf Bde (11 LAD attached), 19 Bn, HQ Div ASC (details), Div Pet Coy (details), 4 Res MT Coy (details), Div Provost Coy (details), Div Postal Unit (details), Div Employment Pl, GHQ 1 and 2 Ech (details), Base Depot (details), Base Pay Office (details), Base Post Office (details).

Burnham: 20 Bn, 27 (MG) Bn (12 LAD attached), Div Supply Column (details), 4 Res MT Coy (details), 4 Fd Amb, 4 Fd Hyg Sec.

² 2 NZ Division did not become the official title in 2 NZEF until 29 June 1942.

³ **Maj-Gen O. H. Mead**, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; born Dunedin, 24 Jan 1892; Regular soldier; Canty Regt 1914–20 (comd 1 Bn and 3 (Res) Bn); Commander, Southern Military District, Oct 1940–Feb 1942; GOC Pacific Section, **2 NZEF**, Feb–Jul 1942; lost at sea in aircraft accident, 25 Jul 1942.

in the Special Force, an infantry battalion rather than the pioneer and labour unit of the First World War. The Government, however, did not announce its decision until October. Thereafter, Maoris who had enrolled in the force were given the option of remaining in camp with their original units or of being transferred to 28 (Maori) Battalion, which would train at **Palmerston North** and leave with the **Second Echelon**, giving the Division ten infantry battalions instead of the nine in the current establishment. In 1914–18 conscription had been applied to the Maoris, but throughout the Second World War enlistment in the battalion was always voluntary. At this stage it was limited to single men between 21 and 35, but by the end of the war married men with two children were being accepted. Recruiting began on 9 October and by the end of the month there were 895 volunteers, from whom a selected group entered Army School, **Trentham**, there to be under the command of Major Dittmer, MBE, MC, ¹ and trained as future officers and NCOs.

Those New Zealanders who enlisted in **Britain** formed the nucleus of what was to be 7 Anti-Tank Regiment. As recruits they were perhaps more sophisticated than the men on the parade grounds of **Burnham** or **Trentham**. They did not belong to the four main groups of the Special Force: general and seasonal labourers; public servants; professional and white-collar workers; farmers and skilled tradesmen. Among them were artists and architects, musicians and journalists, students from Kew Gardens and, for New Zealanders, many odd specialists such as a floor manager from a Lyons Corner House, a colonial servant from North Borneo, idealists from the Spanish War and a cook from the Savoy Hotel. **Aldershot** absorbed them all when they marched in on 26 October to become the New Zealand Anti-Tank Battery (later 34 Battery, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment), with Major **Duff** ² as commanding officer.

In New Zealand, by this time, the **First Echelon** had been in camp for several weeks. The new recruit was being trained, clothed and equipped; he was being made dentally fit; he had received his paybook and had been inoculated against many diseases. He may have spent many hours on the parade ground, enchanted by the spell of orderly movement, but he was just as likely to have

¹ **Brig G. Dittmer**, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Maharahara, 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; Auckland Regt 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn); CO **28 (Maori) Bn** Jan 1940–Feb 1942; comd 1 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) Apr 1942–Aug 1943; 1 Div, Aug 1942–Jan 1943; **Fiji Military Forces** and Fiji Inf Bde Gp, Sep 1943–Nov 1945; Commander, Central Military District, 1946–48.

² **Brig C. S. J. Duff**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 19 Nov 1898; Regular soldier; comd 34 NZ A-Tk Bty 1939–40; CO 7 A-Tk Regt, Oct 1940–May 1941; 4 Fd Regt, Aug 1941–Apr 1942; CRA 3 NZ Div, Aug 1942–Oct 1944; NZLO Melbourne, 1947–48.

spent them in a queue waiting to receive issues of clothing that neither matched nor fitted. And very probably he had suffered in the influenza epidemic that had disrupted the organisation of all four camps in late October and early November. Nevertheless, the camps were expanding rapidly, wet canteens had been established in November and there were encouraging signs of possible service overseas.

The majority of the senior officers in camp, those with the **First Echelon** and those waiting for appointments with the **Second Echelon**, were civilians who had served in 1914–18 and had been members of the Territorial Army during that depressing period between the wars when it was fashionable to decry any interest in military affairs. They may have lacked some of the qualifications of the trained professional soldier, but they had actually held commands, which few Regulars had done, and they were still young enough to train the raw recruits and to command the battalions in the field. In some cases their civilian occupations had

indirectly prepared them for this new adventure. To quote **General Freyberg**: ‘Our Medical Corps and Engineers, for example, are drawn entirely from civilian life with civilians occupying all the senior appointments. Their outlook is different from that of their military counterparts in the British Army. They are more original in thought and more experienced in practice, with the result that many new ideas have developed which have proved of benefit to the whole Army.’ ¹

The brigade commander, Colonel Puttick, DSO, ² was a Regular officer who had commanded a battalion of the Rifle Brigade in 1917–18. He was to show that he had administrative ability, a very high standard of soldierly conduct and the useful gift of knowing, apparently instinctively, what was going on throughout his brigade. It went into action for the first time in **Greece** in April 1941, a well-disciplined and well-trained formation, a credit to his efficiency and common sense.

His brigade major at this stage was Major **Hunt**, ³ another Regular officer. Eighteenth Battalion, drawn from Auckland Province, was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel **Gray**, ⁴ an **Auckland** lawyer; 19

¹ *Army Quarterly*, October 1944, p. 33.

² Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born **Timaru**, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde 1914–19 (CO 3 Bn); comd **4 Bde** Jan 1940–Aug 1941; 2 NZ Div (**Crete**) 29 Apr–27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941–Dec 1945.

³ **Brig F. L. Hunt**, OBE, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Leeston**, 30 Nov 1890; Regular soldier; Otago Regt 1915–16; **2 NZEF**, Egypt, 1940–41; comd 8 Bde, 3 NZ Div, May–Jul 1942; 16 Bde Gp (**Tonga**) Feb 1943–Feb 1944; Adjutant-General, 1946; Quartermaster-General, 1946–48.

⁴ **Brig J. R. Gray**, ED, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO **18 Bn** Sep 1939–Nov 1941, Mar–Jun

1942; comd 4 Bde 29 Jun–5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

Battalion, enlisted from **Wellington**, Taranaki and Hawke's Bay, by **Lieutenant-Colonel Varnham**, MC, ¹ a company manager from **New Plymouth**; and 20 (**South Island**) Battalion by **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger**, ² who had been a lawyer at Rangiora. **Lieutenant-Colonel Pierce**, MC, ³ a farmer, commanded the Divisional Cavalry Regiment and **Lieutenant-Colonel Inglis**, MC, ⁴ a **Timaru** lawyer, commanded 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion. **Varnham**, **Pierce** and **Inglis** had all been commissioned in 1914–18 and had served with distinction; **Kippenberger** had been an infantry private. All were commanding or had recently been commanding Territorial units, **Inglis** a Territorial brigade.

Fourth Field Regiment was commanded by **Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson**, ⁵ a Regular officer who had served as a gunner officer in **France**. Few of the civilian specialists had as yet appeared, so 5 Field Park Company was commanded by **Captain Sanders**, ⁶ a Regular officer, and 6 Field Company by **Major Rudd**, ⁷ another **Auckland** lawyer. Fourth Field Ambulance, however, was commanded by **Lieutenant-Colonel Will**, ⁸ a medical practitioner from

¹ **Brig F. S. Varnham**, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Gisborne**; born **Wellington**, 1 Nov 1888; newspaper manager; **Wellington Regt** 1915–19 (Staff Capt 1 Inf Bde); **CO 19 Bn** Oct 1939–Apr 1941, Jun–Oct 1941; comd 7 Inf Bde Gp (NZ) May 1942–May 1943; injured 15 Apr 1941.

² **Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger**, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born **Ladbrooks**, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; **1 NZEF** 1916–17; **CO 20 Bn** Sep 1939–Apr 1941, Jun–Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde, **Crete**, May 1941; **5 Bde** Jan 1942–Jun 1943, Nov 1943–Feb 1944; **GOC 2 NZ Div**, 30 Apr–14 May 1943, 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; comd 2 NZEF Prisoner-of-War Reception Group (**UK**) Oct 1944– Sep 1945; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, **NZ War Histories**, 1946–57; died **Wellington**, 5 May 1957.

³ **Lt-Col C. J. Pierce**, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born Inglewood, 5 Feb 1893; farmer; Wgtn Mtd Rifles, 1914–19 (Capt); CO Div Cav Sep 1939–Feb 1941; died NZ 31 Jul 1941.

⁴ **Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, VD, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk); Hamilton; born **Mosgiel**, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915–19; CO **27 (MG) Bn**, Dec 1939–Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde, 1941–42, and 4 Armd Bde, 1942–44; GOC 2 NZ Div, 27 Jun–16 Aug 1942, 6 Jun–31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, **Germany**, 1947–50; Stipendiary Magistrate.

⁵ **Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson**, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Christchurch**; born **Wellington**, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; CO **4 Fd Regt** Jan 1940–Aug 1941; comd 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; **6 Bde** Apr 1943–Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun–Aug 1944; comd **6 Bde** Aug 1944–Jun 1945; Quartermaster-General, Army HQ, Jan–Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, **London**, 1946–49; Commander, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

⁶ **Col G. P. Sanders**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born England, 2 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; BM **4 Bde** 1940–41; GSO II NZ Div Apr–Dec 1941; CO **26 Bn** Jun–Jul 1944; **27 (MG) Bn** Nov 1944–Oct 1945; **27 Bn (Japan)** Oct 1945–May 1946; Director of Training, Army HQ, 1949–53; Commander, **Fiji Military Forces**, Oct 1956–Dec 1958.

⁷ **Col L. F. Rudd**, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Christchurch**, 13 Jan 1898; barrister and solicitor; **1 NZEF** 1917–19; wounded and p.w. Apr 1918; OC **6 Fd Coy** 1939–41; Military Secretary, **2 NZEF**, Jul 1941–Mar 1944; comd 2 NZEF Reception Group (**UK**) Aug–Oct 1944; British legal mission to **Greece**, 1945.

⁸ **Lt-Col J. H. Will**, ED; born **Scotland**, 1 Feb 1883; medical

practitioner; CO 4 Fd Amb Oct 1939–Sep 1940; SMO
Ngaruawahia Camp Sep 1941–Jan 1943; died Auckland, 19 Aug
1954.

Auckland, 4 Field Hygiene Section by Major Wyn Irwin,¹ the Medical Officer of Health for **Wellington**. The standard of the junior medical officers with 4 Field Ambulance was high; five were afterwards to command field ambulances and one was to be Assistant Director of Medical Services of 2 New Zealand Division in Italy.

Under the command of these officers the units of the First Echelon began their elementary training. In November 18 Battalion moved from its bell tents at **Hopu Hopu**, near **Ngaruawahia**, to the incomplete but relatively palatial camp at **Papakura**, where there were wooden huts and bitumen roads, hot water and electric lights. The other units spent several weeks in the field. Nineteenth Battalion, the **Divisional Cavalry** and 4 Field Regiment went to **Waiouru**; 20 Battalion and 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion enjoyed an idyllic existence at Cave but trained very seriously. The exercises may have been too advanced but the men were enthusiastic, even if there was a shortage of such modern equipment as mortars, anti-tank rifles, Bren carriers and transport.

In November 1939 while the echelon was doing this training, the deputy Prime Minister, the Hon. P. Fraser, was in **London** attending a conference of Commonwealth ministers and discussing with the British authorities the future movements of the Expeditionary Force. They decided that the international situation and the attitude of **Japan** in particular justified the despatch of a complete division. In organisation it would be similar to a British infantry division with an additional battalion, though New Zealand had no objection to its conversion into a motorised formation after its arrival overseas. In the first instance its destination would be Egypt, on account of the training facilities in that country and because of its strategic importance in the **Middle East**. The **First Echelon** would leave in January 1940. It was thought that the early despatch of Dominion troops might possibly have a good effect

upon world opinion and would most certainly alleviate New Zealand's problem of equipment and accommodation. The Division was to be complete by the beginning of August and fully trained by the end of September; the first section ² of the reinforcements would arrive in July 1940.

These decisions had not been easy to make, nor had they been just a matter for discussion between the representatives of Great Britain and New Zealand. In many cases the respective interests

¹ Maj B. T. Wyn Irwin, m.i.d.; born Christchurch, 12 Oct 1905; Medical Officer of Health, Wellington; OC 4 Fd Hyg Sec Oct 1939–Sep 1941; OC Maadi Camp Hyg Sec Sep–Dec 1941; died 12 Mar 1942.

² Though this was the first section of the reinforcements to go overseas, it was, in succession to the three echelons, always known as the 4th Reinforcements.

of Australia and New Zealand had to be considered. There had been no difference of opinion about their forces being sent to the Middle East. Much would have been gained, 'particularly from the psychological point of view', by sending the Australian and New Zealand troops to Britain. But they would have arrived in winter to occupy unprepared quarters and, at this juncture, it was essential to build up a strategic reserve in the Middle East. This was the deciding factor, important at the moment and still more important in the future history of the Dominion.

There was a difference of opinion between the two Dominions as to the date on which the forces should be sent to the Middle East. The Australian Government could see no reason why Dominion troops should be transferred to the unruffled battle front in France, nor could it understand how transports and naval convoys could be found when there was a shortage of shipping for Australian exports. More important still, it was not convinced that Japan would remain neutral and that the

Admiralty could maintain the security of **Singapore**. For these reasons the Government with a continent to defend did not wish to make any hasty decision. New Zealand, on the other hand, wished to send her **First Echelon** overseas as soon as its elementary training was completed. This would enable the **Second Echelon** to enter camp and the **First Echelon** to train overseas with the modern equipment which did not exist in New Zealand. The opinion of the Government was 'that the retention of our voluntary system of recruiting is to some extent dependent on the knowledge and the fact that the men will serve overseas.'¹ Therefore New Zealand on 20 November, without consulting **Australia**, informed Great Britain that the **First Echelon** would be sent to the **Middle East** in January 1940.

The following day the Australian Government suggested that 'we should watch developments of the next three or four weeks before committing ourselves to the despatch of our division overseas.' The New Zealand Government, having assumed that the question was one of 'common arrangement' with their respective ministers in **London**, now regretted that there was no longer time to discuss the question. Arrangements had already been made by the Prime Minister, the **Rt. Hon. M. J. Savage**, on 23 November to announce that the Division would be sent overseas. The Prime Minister of **Australia**, Mr Menzies, made a similar announcement on 29 November. His hand may have been forced by the New Zealand announcement and he may have been embarrassed

¹ *Documents relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War*, Vol. I, p. 44.

politically,¹ though at the conference in London Australia had made it quite clear that she had every intention of sending a force overseas. The important lesson for the future was his gentle reminder to New Zealand that the two Dominions had, at her suggestion,² agreed in 1938 to exchange opinions about defence policy, and in time of war to supply each other with the fullest possible information.

An equally important subject was the appointment of a commander for the Expeditionary Force. So much depended upon this decision that Mr Fraser had been considering the subject ever since he landed in **Britain**. In 1914 it had been perfectly natural that the commander and senior staff officers should come from the British Army. Sir Andrew Russell, a Hawke's Bay sheep-farmer of 'very remarkable and outstanding qualities', ³ had certainly commanded 1 New Zealand Division in 1916–18, but he was an ex-regular and the Expeditionary Force as a whole had been commanded throughout the war by a British officer, Sir Alexander Godley.

But Gallipoli and the long campaigns in **France, Flanders** and **Palestine**, the Balfour Report and the Statute of Westminster ⁴ had changed the status of the Dominion. The Division in 1939 would be more than a component of the British Army; it would be the national army of New Zealand. This meant that Fraser had to do more than recommend an officer who could command the Division in action. He had to select an able administrator who could conduct the affairs of an independent army and carry out the policy of the Dominion Government.

At any other time it might have been difficult to find such a commander, but fortunately there was a New Zealander with all these qualifications. He was **Major-General Bernard Freyberg**, VC, CB, CMG, DSO, LLD, ⁵ who had offered his services to the Dominion and expressed the hope that he might serve with his compatriots. At the moment he was commanding the Salisbury Plain Area, but General Sir William Ironside, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, intended in the very near future to give him the

¹ Mr Curtin, Leader of the Opposition in the Australian Federal Parliament, had stated publicly that he was opposed to the despatch of a force overseas. See *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 48–9.

² *Documents*, Vol. I, Appx III, pp. 338–9.

³ Colonel H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division in 1916–19*, p. 614.

⁴ Although the Statute of Westminster was passed in 1931 it was not fully adopted by New Zealand until 1947. Its principles, however, had influenced New Zealand's policy long before that date. As a self-governing Dominion, the country had her responsibilities and naturally moved in step with the more mature members of the Commonwealth.

⁵ **Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg**, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Gk); born **Richmond, Surrey**, 21 Mar 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914–16; comd 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–18; GOC **2 NZEF** Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand Jun 1946–Aug 1952.

command of a British division. If the **New Zealand Government** was to utilise his services, the most suitable position for him would be that of commander of the Expeditionary Force. The organisation and training of the units in New Zealand would be the responsibility of Major-General Duigan, ¹ then Chief of the General Staff.

General Freyberg's contemporaries did what one's contemporaries do not always do—they spoke highly of him. And Mr Fraser was impressed by the importance the General attached to the welfare and health of his soldiers. His offer was accepted and, on 23 November, Mr Savage announced that the force would be sent overseas to an undisclosed destination under the command of **General Freyberg**. From Britain Fraser afterwards said, 'Indeed, I think it proper to say that I have heard no criticism of the appointment and nothing but praise, and that I am entirely satisfied that the right thing has been done.'

The soldier who won such respect from the prudent Mr Fraser was

born in **Surrey** in 1889 and brought to New Zealand at the age of two. As **Bernard Cyril Freyberg**—Freyberg Tertius—he attended **Wellington College**, where he was prominent as a natural athlete, a magnificent swimmer. Since then he had moved in many different worlds and played too many distinctive parts for him to be described as a typical New Zealander.

In 1912 he had left for **North America** and did not reappear until 1914, when he became an officer in the Hood battalion of the Royal Naval Division. With that formation he took part in the expedition to Antwerp and won the Distinguished Service Order at **Gallipoli** for an individual exploit ‘as gallant as it was picturesque.’² On the night of 25–26 April he had swum ashore to a beach in the Gulf of Xeros and lit oil flares to divert the attention of the Turks from the landings made elsewhere on the peninsula. This was typical of his service throughout the war, at the end of which he was 29 years of age and an acting Major-General in command of 29 Division.

He had won the Victoria Cross for most gallant conduct at Beaucourt in 1916, been awarded two bars to his DSO, been mentioned in despatches six times and wounded nine times. In 1916–18 he had commanded a battalion or a brigade in almost all the great battles on the Western Front: on the **Somme**, at Arras and Bullecourt, at Third Ypres, on **Passchendaele**, in the German offensive in **Flanders** in 1918. And on the morning of Armistice Day he had

¹ Maj-Gen Sir John Duigan, KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d.; born NZ 30 Mar 1882; served South Africa, 1900–1; **1 NZEF** 1915–18; Chief of General Staff, NZ Military Forces, 1937–41; died 9 Jan 1950.

² Brigadier-General C. F. Aspinall-Oglander, *History of the Great War: Gallipoli*, pp. 164–5.

been leading the pursuit, just as he was to be doing in Venezia Giulia

when the fighting in **Europe** ended in 1945.

Having found the profession to which he was perfectly adapted, it was natural that he should join the Regular Army, this time as an officer in the Grenadier Guards. He rose to command 1 Battalion, The Manchester Regiment, from 1929 to 1931, to be Assistant Quartermaster-General, Southern Command, 1931–33, and General Staff Officer, 1st Grade, at the War Office, 1933–34. In July 1934 he was promoted major-general, the youngest to hold that rank in the British Army.

But in spite of this record he was no conventional soldier. As the friend of **Sir James Barrie**¹ he was familiar with the world of authors and playwrights; he had made two determined attempts to swim the Channel; as a Conservative candidate he had fought an unsuccessful election campaign; and he had written 'A Study in Unit Administration' for the guidance of regimental officers.

In this manual the author showed that he had common sense, an interest in administration and the ability to write a readable treatise on what could have been a dull subject. He argued that 'The running of an army unit is really the same as carrying on any business. There is a definite objective in business, i.e., to make money. In the Army administration it is to feed, clothe and keep the man fit and as happy as possible. And to hand over to him at the pay table each week his pay intact.' With due care this could be done. Mess accounts for a complete year should be studied to ensure a uniform standard of living, irrespective of fluctuations in the cost of food and the expense of extra meals during training periods. The **NAAFI**² should be supported, not only because of its rebates but because its books could be used to see how the men spent their money. If they spent it on foodstuffs then something was wrong. His theory was that a high incidence of crime in a unit was due to the financial problems created for the rank and file by faulty administration.

In 1937, however, it looked as if **General Freyberg** would no longer

be free to apply these theories. For medical reasons which now seem incredible he was placed on the retired list when Mr Hore-Belisha was making his changes in the War Office. From then until he was recalled to the Army at the outbreak of war he was free to play a part in the world of business. The value of this experience was seen when he visited **France** in 1939 and had the following comments to make about the defence system:

¹ Denis Mackail, *The Story of J. M. B.*; **Sir James Barrie**, *Courage*.

² Navy, Army and Air Force Institute: 'an Army institution and the only monopoly I know of that works.'— **General Freyberg**.

During my year as a civilian I had been working as a director of a large combine of companies in the Midlands which had expanded very quickly and built a large number of new factories. I had worked on these in a minor way with business men and had learned what was the cheapest and best method of excavating and moving large quantities of earth and building in ferro concrete. I also learned the value of machine power tools and how they should be used—bulldozers, angle dozers, steam navvys, Decauville railways and the like. My feelings at seeing the British Army trying to build an area of ferro concrete pill-boxes, involving the handling of hundreds of tons of material, without light railways and power-driven concrete mixers must be experienced to be understood. It made me unhappy to see the men trying in many cases to do with shovels and wheelbarrows what was plainly a job for machinery.... The trouble about military engineering is that in this class of work we are all amateurs in the Army, and there is a rooted objection to being taught by civilians. ¹

In his own case this was not correct. His foray into the industrial world of the Midlands had left him with the greatest respect for the civilian experience of his engineers, signallers and medical officers.

He had, moreover, been observing, learning and readjusting his life ever since he left New Zealand in 1912. This long apprenticeship had given him the knowledge and the experience which were essential if he was to be the successful commander of **2 NZEF**. He understood New Zealanders and they, in turn, admired him for his courage, respected him for his integrity and were grateful for the unremitting care with which he watched over their welfare. He was familiar with the ways of the War Office, an invaluable qualification for the commander of a semi-independent army.

Shortly after this appointment the Army Board selected the staff of Divisional Headquarters. The majority of them were Regular officers with records that usually began with training at Duntroon Military College in **Australia** and went on to service in the First World War; that over, it was service in New Zealand and, in some cases, a staff course in England. Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart ² was GSO I and Major Gentry ³ GSO II. Lieutenant-Colonel **Stevens**, ⁴

¹ **General Freyberg**, Historical Review, 3 September 1939–September 1940, p. 8.

² Maj-Gen Sir Keith Stewart, KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); **Kerikeri**; born **Timaru**, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; **1 NZEF** 1917–19; GSO I NZ Div 1940–41; Deputy Chief of General Staff Dec 1941–Jul 1943; comd **5 Bde** Aug–Nov 1943, **4 Armd Bde** Nov 1943–Mar 1944, **5 Bde** Mar–Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd **9 Bde** (**2 NZEF, Japan**) Nov 1945–Jul 1946; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949–Mar 1952.

³ Maj-Gen Sir William Gentry, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **London**, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO II NZ Div 1939–40; AA & QMG Oct 1940–41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd **6 Bde** Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff 1943–44; comd NZ Troops in Egypt, **6 NZ Div**, and NZ Maadi Camp, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; **9 Bde** (**Italy**) 1945; Deputy Chief of General Staff, Jul 1946–Nov 1947;

Adjutant-General, Apr 1949–Mar 1952; Chief of General Staff Apr 1952–Aug 1955.

⁴ **Maj-Gen W. G. Stevens**, CB, CBE, m.i.d.; England; born **London**, 11 Dec 1893; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1915–19 (Maj); AA & QMG, NZ Div, 1940; Officer in Charge of Administration, **2 NZEF**, 1940–45; GOC **2 NZEF**, 22 Nov 1945–6 Jul 1946.

who had been Secretary of the Defence Council in New Zealand and of the Organisation for National Security, was Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General.

The Commander Royal Artillery was Colonel Miles, DSO, MC, ¹ a very able artilleryman and a highly trained Regular officer who was to enforce rigid discipline. The foundations he laid were largely responsible for the high standard of support which the infantry always received from the New Zealand artillery. Lieutenant- Colonel Crump, OBE, ² who had commanded the New Zealand **Army Service Corps** in Egypt in 1918, was to command it throughout the whole of the war in the **Middle East** and **Italy**. Major S. F. **Allen**, ³ with experience on the North-West Frontier, commanded **Divisional Signals** and the Commander **Royal Engineers** for a short period was Major Clifton, MC, ⁴ a graduate of Duntroon Military College, who had been in **India** in 1919–20. The only civilian in the group, as yet, was Lieutenant-Colonel MacCormick, DSO, ⁵ the Assistant Director of Medical Services, an **Auckland** surgeon who had served on **Gallipoli** and in **France**. The others were appointed shortly afterwards from the ranks of the senior Territorial officers. Lieutenant-Colonel Falla, CMG, DSO, ⁶ manager of the Union Steam Ship Company and commander of 2 (Army) New Zealand Field Artillery Brigade in 1918, was appointed Commandant, New Zealand Overseas Base; Colonel Sir Stephen Allen, KBE, CMG, DSO, ⁷ a lawyer who had commanded 2 Battalion, **Auckland**

¹ **Brig R. Miles**, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914–19;

CRA 2 NZ Div 1940–41; comd 2 NZEF (UK) 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; died Spain, 20 Oct 1943.

² **Brig S. H. Crump, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915–19; Commander NZASC, 2 NZ Div, 1940–45; comd 2 NZEF, Japan, Jun–Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in Japan, 1948–49.**

³ **Brig S. F. Allen, OBE, m.i.d.; born Liverpool, 17 May 1897; Regular soldier; CO 2 NZ Div Sigs and OC NZ Corps of Sigs Jan 1940–Sep 1941; CO 21 Bn Dec 1941–May 1942, Jun–Jul 1942; comd 5 Bde 10 May–12 Jun 1942; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.**

⁴ **Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and 2 bars, MC, m.i.d.; Porangahau; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1919–21 (MC, Waziristan); BM 5 Bde 1940; CRE NZ Div 1940–41; Chief Engineer 30 Corps, 1941–42; comd 6 Bde Feb–Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped Germany, Mar 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1949–52; Commander, Northern Military District, Mar 1952–Sep 1953.**

⁵ **Brig K. MacCormick, CB, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 13 Jan 1891; surgeon; 1 NZEF 1914–19; Egypt, Gallipoli, France—OC 2 Fd Amb Dec 1917– Jan 1918; DADMS 1 NZ Div Jan–Oct 1918; ADMS Northern Military District, 1930–34; ADMS 2 NZEF Jan–Oct 1940; DMS 2 NZEF Oct 1940–May 1942, Sep 1942–Apr 1943.**

⁶ **Brig N. S. Falla, CMG, DSO, m.i.d.; born Westport, 3 May 1883; managing director Union Steam Ship Coy; NZ Fd Arty 1914–19 (Lt-Col comd 2 and 3 NZ FA Bdes); comd 2 NZEF Base, Feb 1940–Jun 1941; NZ repve on Ministry of Transport, London, 1941–45; died 6 Nov 1945.**

⁷ **Col Sir Stephen Allen, KBE, CMG, DSO and bar, VD, m.i.d.; Morrinsville; born Cheadle, England, 2 Aug 1882; Auck Regt 1915–19 (CO 2 Bn); Administrator of Western Samoa, 1928–31; Military Secretary, 2 NZEF, Mar 1940–Jul 1941.**

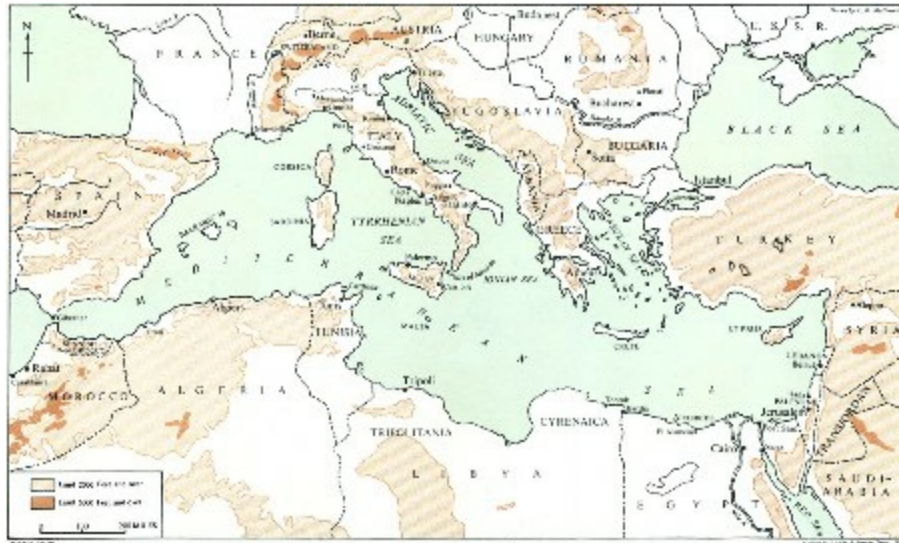
Regiment, in 1918 and had been Administrator of **Western Samoa**, became Military Secretary.

Another problem of this period was the sailing date of the First Echelon. It was to have been 20 January 1940 but the War Office, because of shipping problems and the provision of escorts, had either to advance the sailing date three weeks or postpone it for six. The Government chose the earlier date because it meant training in Egypt with more modern equipment, a possible stimulus to recruiting in New Zealand and accommodation in the camps for the **Second Echelon**. The one concession it asked for was a week's delay in order to give **General Freyberg** at least ten days in New Zealand before the troops left the country. This meant that the sailing date had to be 6 January.

The only escort for the convoy would have been HMS *Leander* had not Mr Fraser persuaded Mr Churchill to provide more substantial protection. The first addition was HMAS *Canberra*, and when Fraser suggested that the Admiralty could do better still, HMS *Ramillies* was added to the escort. As he explained to Mr Churchill, no battleship had ever visited New Zealand and this was a splendid opportunity of 'intensifying the already high morale of the New Zealand people.'

If all went according to plan the troops would be taken to a training area in Egypt, the theatre of operations would be in western **Europe**, and the permanent base for the Division would be in the **United Kingdom**. In preparation for this **General Freyberg** had already approached the War Office. He wanted good modern barracks, a train service with cheap fares to **London**, and a site within which he could group all hospitals and base organisations. The reply was that **Aldershot** had already been allotted to the Canadians, otherwise **2 NZEF** could have any base that it desired. The authorities would open any area for it 'on the same principle that room in the garage is always found for the guest's car'.¹ **General Freyberg** chose Colchester because it had modern barracks and was reasonably close to **London**.

Then, after a short visit to **France** to see conditions for himself, he left on 4 December for a hurried flight out to New Zealand and back to the **Middle East**. On the way he selected in Egypt the sites of the temporary camps in which the echelons were to assemble, be equipped and trained as a complete division. With suitability for health, training and recreation as the important factors he chose **Maadi** and **Helwan**. They were comparatively free from mosquitoes, had suitable training space and were within easy



The Mediterranean Theatre

The Mediterranean Theatre

¹ **General Freyberg**, Historical Review, p. 12.

range of **Cairo**. Arrangements were made for their preparation and the General continued on his flight, now travelling with the Australian delegation headed by Mr Casey and the New Zealand delegation led by Mr Fraser.

In Australia there was time for him to discuss past problems with General Sir Brudenell White, ¹ who had been Chief of Staff with General Birdwood in 1914–18, and to study the latest variations of them with General Blamey and the Australian Military Council. They agreed, for instance, that Dominion troops should accept British rations provided that their commanders had the authority to increase them when

necessary. The General then sailed from **Sydney**, reaching **Wellington** on Christmas Day.

His first duty was to meet the Minister for Defence, the Hon. F. Jones, and describe the work that had already been done in **Britain** and the **Middle East**. He then tabled some of the questions which would have to be discussed when he met the full Cabinet after the New Year.

He suggested that the Government should always have direct access to his opinion, that the administration, discipline, promotion and pay of officers should be completely under its control, that the force must be adequately equipped and always employed as a complete formation, never split up and used piecemeal. He agreed that whenever possible it should be built up with New Zealand officers and emphasised the necessity of its having a permanent base in England.

General Freyberg brought up one other very important subject. The New Zealand Division would in many ways be an army within an army. To avoid possible friction with the Higher Command, it would be wise to define very clearly the powers which the Government should reserve to itself and the special powers with which it should invest its GOC. He himself desired such administrative and financial powers as the right to vary the ration scale and to incur unforeseen expenses for the protection of the health of his troops. In a state of emergency—and he must be the sole judge of what was such a state—he must be able to use the Division as he thought fit and then to communicate his decisions direct to the Government.

The final decision could not be given at this stage. For the next few days there were public receptions and a visit to the Prime Minister, Mr Savage, staff conferences and the inspection of troops of the **First Echelon** at their camps. It was not until 5 January that he met the full Cabinet to discuss the future of **2 NZEF**.

¹ The officer who had played 'the outstanding part' in building 1 AIF. 'No one more learned in the problems that faced the leaders

of a Dominion expeditionary force could have been found'.—
Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 84.

The fundamental fact was that the Dominion had come of age. The Expeditionary Force was not an integral part of the British Army. In time it would be 'a citizen force with its own complete freedom of administration, its own training establishment, its own hospitals and medical services staffed by New Zealand doctors, dentists, sisters and VADs and its own welfare workers.'¹

No common policy to meet such a situation had been drawn up by the Dominions, but it was understood that their respective forces would operate as national units. Nevertheless, there were to be interesting variations in procedure. Canadian troops operated under British command in **Britain** or for raids across the Channel, but their participation in major operations had to have the approval of the Canadian Government, and that depended upon negotiations between Churchill and Mackenzie King. South Africa followed much the same line. Her troops were under British command, but their spheres of operation depended upon the close association which soon developed between Smuts and Churchill. **Australia**, on the other hand, decided that her commander must have a charter² defining his powers, giving him the right of direct communication with his government and stating that no part of the Force was to be 'detached or employed apart from the Force without his consent'.

The New Zealand Government was of much the same opinion. The conditions of service were therefore based upon an agreement between the British and New Zealand Governments. All major decisions, such as the employment of the force, were to be made by the New Zealand War Cabinet, and the force would be under the command of an Allied Commander-in-Chief for operational purposes only, but not for training, organisation, administration or discipline. In other words, **General Freyberg** was to take his instructions from the general under whose command he was serving, but his actions were subject to the wishes of

the New Zealand Government. The Government in its turn had the right to discuss with the British Government all questions of policy and, if necessary, the right to consult **General Freyberg** when any question was being discussed with the War Office.

The situation was not without precedent in military history; when commenting on the problems of the American Army in **France** in 1917–18, General Pershing said:

The attitude that the French assumed toward us in the World War was in marked contrast with the views held by them when their troops so generously came to **America** to aid us in the Revolution. The French Commander at that time received very explicit instructions from his

¹ **General Freyberg** in *Army Quarterly*, October 1944, p. 33.

² Based on that drawn up in 1914–18.

Government on this subject, as the following sent to Rochambeau shortly before he sailed for **America** will show:

‘It is His Majesty's desire and He hereby commands that, so far as circumstances will permit, the Count de Rochambeau shall maintain the integrity of the French troops which His Majesty has placed under his command, and that at the proper time he shall express to General **Washington**, Commander-in-Chief of the forces of the Congress, under whose orders the French troops are to serve, that it is the intention of the King that these shall not be dispersed in any manner, and that they shall serve at all times as a unit and under the French generals, except in the case of a temporary detachment which shall rejoin the main body without delay.’ ¹

The British commanders, French and Haig, Plumer and Milne, when serving under Allied commanders-in-chief had been in the same position. The last-named, in **Macedonia** in 1916–17, had to ‘comply with the

orders of the Commander-in-Chief with respect to military operations, “subject to the right of direct communication with, and reference to his own Government.”” ²

The special powers desired by and granted without limitation to **General Freyberg** were along similar lines, and the following memoranda in which they were stated can, therefore, be termed his charter of authority:

5 January 1940

The General Officer for the time being

Commanding the 2nd New Zealand

Expeditionary Force Overseas

The General Officer Commanding will act in accordance with the instructions he receives from the Commander-in-Chief under whose command he is serving, subject only to the requirements of His Majesty's Government in New Zealand. He will, in addition to powers appearing in any relevant Statute or Regulations, be vested with the following powers:

- (In the case of sufficiently grave emergency or in special
a) circumstances, of which he must be the sole judge, to make decisions as to the employment of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, and to communicate such decisions directly to the New Zealand Government, notwithstanding that in the absence of that extraordinary cause such communication would not be in accordance with the normal channels of communication indicated in the following paragraphs and which for greater clearness are also indicated in an attached diagram. ³
 - (To communicate directly with the **New Zealand Government** and with
b) the Army Department concerning any matter connected with the training and administration of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force.
 - (To communicate directly either with the **New Zealand Government** or
c) with the Commander-in-Chief under whose command he is serving, in respect of all details leading up to and arising from policy decisions.
-

¹ John J. Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War*, p. 386.

² Cyril Falls, *Military Operations, Macedonia*, p. 256.

³ Not reproduced.

(In all matters pertaining to equipment, to communicate with the War
d) Office through normal channels, and through the liaison officer of
the High Commissioner's office in **London**, the former to be the
official channel.

(In matters of command, to adhere to the normal military channels
e) between the War Office and the General Officer Commanding the 2nd
New Zealand Expeditionary Force overseas.

(To establish such administrative headquarters and base and line of
f) communication units as are necessary for the functions of command,
organisation [including training], and administration with which he
has been invested.

(To organise, [train], ¹ change, vary, or group units and formations in
g) such manner as he considers expedient from time to time.

(To fix and alter the establishment and composition of units and
h) formations as the exigencies of service may in his opinion require
from time to time.

After the **Third Echelon** has left New Zealand no officer above the
substantive rank of captain will be sent overseas without the
concurrence of the General Officer Commanding. ²

M. J. SAVAGE, Prime Minister

5 January 1940

Major-General B. C. Freyberg, General Officer Commanding, 2nd New
Zealand Expeditionary Force Overseas, **Wellington**

The General Officer Commanding is hereby vested with the following
powers:

(1) Authority to increase the scale of ration, if necessary.

(2) Authority to procure equipment (shown on equipment tables) that

cannot be supplied through official channels. Such equipment to be bought through Ordnance channels where possible.

- (3) Authority to incur expenditures which cannot be foreseen at present, and which the General Officer Commanding considers necessary, for protection of the health of the Force.
- (4) Authority to incur expenditure, not exceeding £500 for any one transaction, for the recreation or other amenities of the Force.
- (5) Authority to disburse, at the discretion of the General Officer Commanding, from an entertainment fund which will be provided, to an amount not exceeding £1000 per annum.

F. JONES, Minister of Defence

¹ The references to training in square brackets in paragraphs (f) and (g) have been added at **General Freyberg's** request. They are not included in the text of this memorandum in the files of the Prime Minister's Department, but were later added to the memorandum at the GOC's request.

² This provision had the unforeseen result of making **2 NZEF** a 'closed shop'.

On the same day as this Cabinet meeting, the **First Echelon** was embarking on the transports ¹ then assembled at **Lyttelton** and **Wellington**. In spite of all precautions the public was aware of the imminent departure of the convoy. There was a huge crowd at **Lyttelton** on the afternoon of 5 January when HMS *Leander* left with the **Dunera** and the **Sobieski**; next morning a still greater number of spectators watched from the slopes overlooking Port Nicholson when HMS **Ramillies** and HMAS **Canberra** steamed out with the **Empress of Canada**, **Strathaird**, **Orion** and **Rangitata**. The groups met in Cook Strait shortly after sunrise on 6 January and late that same afternoon New Zealand faded into the haze behind them.

The next few weeks passed by without the strain and the sense of urgency felt by those who sailed in later convoys. **Italy** and **Japan** were still neutral and there was no thought of the impending collapse in

northern **France**. The living quarters on the transports were quite luxurious. The *Dunera* was an army transport with all the simplicity and most of the discomforts of such ships, but the others, being converted passenger liners, provided superb quarters with many of the amenities expected by peacetime tourists. There may have been parades and inspections, fatigues and anti-aircraft duties, but there were also cabin quarters, large dining saloons and an amazing area of deck space.

The convoy, with ships from **Sydney**² and another great liner from **Melbourne**, went on to **Fremantle** and Colombo and from there, with a French transport and the aircraft-carrier HMS *Eagle*, sailed into the Gulf of **Aden**. Here it divided, the *Orion* and the *Rangitata* with three of the Australian transports refuelling at **Aden**, the French ship going to French Somaliland and the remainder entering the **Red Sea**.

The first ship to anchor at **Port Tewfik** on the morning of 12 February was the *Empress of Canada*. There was an official welcome by Mr Anthony Eden on behalf of the King and the British Parliament; **General Freyberg** replied and soon afterwards 4 Field Regiment disembarked into the lighters. Later that morning the *Dunera* and *Sobieski* arrived, the *Orion* steamed in that night and the *Rangitata* appeared next morning.

¹ *Dunera* (1355 all ranks, including **20 Bn**, **4 Fd Amb**, **4 Fd Hyg Sec**, 3 members of the **NZANS** and 307 all ranks, including Div Sigs, 14 LAD and Base Details from Wellington); *Sobieski* (1145 all ranks, including **27 (MG) Bn**, Div Sup Coln); *Empress of Canada* (809 all ranks, including HQ 2 NZ Div and **4 Fd Regt**); *Strathaird* (1350 all ranks, including **19 Bn**, **6 Fd Coy**, **5 Fd Pk Coy**); *Orion* (1428 all ranks, including **4 RMT Coy**, A Section Div Amn Coy, Div Pet Coy); *Rangitata* (442 all ranks, including A and B Sqns Div Cav Regt, Base Details). The total number embarked was 6529 all ranks.

² On 10 January the *Empress of Canada* escorted by HMS *Ramillies* left the convoy and paid a short visit to **Sydney**, where **General Freyberg** and the ADMS, Lt-Col Mac- Cormick,

disembarked to go by air to Egypt.

By 15 February the disembarkation was complete and the units were establishing themselves in **Maadi Camp**, some 90 miles from **Port Tewfik**. From the crowded troop trains the men had studied the already monotonous desert, the dusty sun-soaked villages and the feluccas coming down the **Nile** with their cargoes of vegetables and livestock. The trains stopped at the level crossing outside the camp, and the battalions tumbled out to march in column of route behind the pipe band of the **Cameron Highlanders**, past **General Freyberg** and into **Maadi Camp**.

Here the New Zealanders were eight miles from **Cairo**, within sight of the Pyramids across the **Nile** and immediately east of the **Abbassia- Tura** railway line. A sandy plateau was overlooked by a rock-strewn hillock ¹ on which were the huts and tents of Divisional Headquarters. Around this hill and below it the advance party, with British and Indian engineers supervising Egyptian labour, had laid out a camp that was in time to have hundreds of huts, miles of tarmac roads, miles of drains and miles of water pipes. The cookhouses, messrooms, canteens and shower-houses of the great encampment were still being constructed; it was, as yet, a world of small tents camouflaged to blend with the reddish-brown sand. In this mushroom town the echelon was to establish itself and begin its final training.

The **Divisional Cavalry** received Bren carriers and light tanks (Mark VIB) and 4 Field Regiment 18-pounders and 4.5-inch howitzers. Fourth Infantry Brigade endured route marches, sent its specialists away for courses of instruction and its senior officers to TEWTs ² in preparation for large-scale manoeuvres. The Divisional Signals, not having the equipment to operate the signals office and the telephone exchange, trained as infantrymen or attended courses. The **Army Service Corps** units—4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company, Ammunition Company (A Section), Petrol Company and Divisional Supply Column—were given courses in desert driving and trade tests and were allocated a proportion of the vehicles arriving from **Britain**. Within a few months they were

providing the transport for **Maadi Camp**, the Base Supply Depot and the Field Bakery.

Equally important were the questions of ration allowances and well-trained cooks. For a short time the ration scale was larger than that allowed for in the field and considerably better than that of other British units. So before long **General Freyberg** was advising his Government that, although the troops might be used to a

¹ This holy of holies was known to the irreverent soldiery as 'Bludger's Hill'.

² Tactical exercises without troops.

different proportion of butter and meat, he could not ask for larger amounts when **Europe** was short of food and Allied troops were fighting alongside his Division. 'Anyway butter is not available in such quantities and secondly it makes a rather invidious comparison which no one would welcome.' He made arrangements to reduce this disparity and the troops, curiously enough, noticed no difference.

The success of the changeover was probably due to the improved standards of cooking. The graduates from the School of Cookery in **Trentham** were not qualified cooks under **Middle East** conditions. They had to be given instruction in the breaking down of bulk rations and in the handling of food in the field. For this there was the 2 NZEF School of Cookery modelled on that of the RASC at **Aldershot**. **General Freyberg** had consulted the manager of Lyons' chain of restaurants, who was adviser to the War Office on army catering, and the War Office had agreed to send four non-commissioned officers as the nucleus of a staff. They were delayed when the *Oronsay* was attacked ¹ off the coast of **Scotland** and forced back into port, but an urgent appeal for instructors in the **Middle East** brought over an expert from **7 Armoured Division**, a master cook, who directed the school until the regular staff arrived in December.

At the same time the medical and dental units were taking over their duties. Fourth Field Hygiene Section became responsible for the sanitation of **Maadi Camp** and 4 Field Ambulance established a camp hospital, though the more serious cases were sent to 2/10 British General Hospital at **Helmieh, Cairo**, where some of the medical staff of 4 Field Ambulance and the eighteen New Zealand nurses were responsible for the New Zealand patients. Second New Zealand General Hospital was to have taken over these cases, but other arrangements had to be made when that unit was diverted to **Britain** with the **Second Echelon**. Fourth New Zealand General Hospital, with Lieutenant-Colonel Button ² in command and Miss Brown ³ as matron, was then established in the Grand Hotel at **Helwan**, a fashionable health resort about 18 miles up the river from **Cairo**. To it the patients from **Maadi Camp** and from 2/10 British General Hospital were transferred on 31 July.

The next step was to arrange for the movement from **Britain** of some members of the medical staff who had travelled with the **Second Echelon**. In the August convoy ⁴ which arrived in Egypt on

¹ See p. 40.

² Col E. L. Button, OBE, ED; **Wellington**; born **London**, 9 Mar 1903; surgeon; CO 4 **Gen Hosp** Jul–Sep 1940; in charge surgical division 3 **Gen Hosp**, Mar 1941–Sep 1943; CO 1 Mob CCS Oct 1943–Aug 1944.

³ Matron Miss D. I. Brown, RRC, m.i.d.; now Mrs R. G. Milne, **Wellington**; born **Napier**, 24 Apr 1905; sister; sister-in-charge Camp Hospital, **Ngaruawahia**, Oct 1939–Jan 1940; Matron 4 **Gen Hosp** Jul–Oct 1940; Matron 2 **Gen Hosp** Oct 1940–Jun 1943.

⁴ See p. 35.

Nursing Service, officers and staff from **1 General Hospital** and **5 Field Ambulance**, and **1 Convalescent Depot** as a complete unit. These detached personnel joined the staff of **4 General Hospital**; in **October 1 Convalescent Depot** took over a British establishment at **Moascar**, near the **Suez Canal**.

The dental officers were fully occupied attempting to solve the problems of a temporary dental hospital and insufficient equipment when the echelon provided as many dental cases in one month as did the two British divisions in Egypt in three months. They had to persevere until the Mobile Dental Section arrived in September with the **Third Echelon**.

Divisional Headquarters and the **First Echelon** were thus laying the foundation upon which the Division was to expand and train for the next five years. As some compensation for the monotony and discomfort of this pioneer work, every effort was made to provide the more simple amenities. In the camp itself were Shafto's picture theatre, the **NAAFI** canteens, and a laundry service for all clothing. The Maadi swimming bath was built by **6 Field Company** within five weeks of the camp's being occupied; it was officially opened when **General Freyberg**, the most notable swimmer in **2 NZEF**, took the first plunge.

Outside the camp there was, within a fortnight of the echelon's arrival, that wonderful institution, the **Maadi Recreation Tent**, organised and operated for other ranks by the British women in the European suburb of **Maadi**. And beyond the shaded avenues of **Maadi** township there was always **Cairo**.¹ Liberal leave was granted, the railcars were numerous, and the fare to Bab-el-Louk station was one piastre. Later, if one was so fortunate, there was long leave up the river to **Luxor** or north into **Palestine**.

Such were the conditions for training and recreation at the end of April 1940. By then the first exercises at brigade level had been held at **El Saff** and the first reinforcements had arrived—not from New Zealand but from **Britain**. **Thirty-fourth Battery**, **7 Anti-Tank Regiment**, having

completed its training at **Aldershot**, had sailed from **Southampton** to **Cherbourg**, crossed **France** by rail to **Marseilles** and from there travelled in *HMT Devonshire* to **Egypt**.

¹ The **New Zealand Services Club** was opened on 5 February 1941. Until then, and afterwards, New Zealand troops were always welcomed by other clubs and entertained in different institutions organised by the British community in **Egypt**.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 2 – THE SECOND ECHELON

CHAPTER 2

The Second Echelon

ON 12 January 1940 the main drafts of the **Second Echelon** assembled ¹ and were taken over by their officers and NCOs who had already been in camp for some weeks. In general the new echelon was much the same as its predecessor. The men were no different; the **Regular Force**, trained for the work and immediately available, still provided a proportion of the staff. There may have been fewer lawyers among the senior officers but the majority of them, as was the case with 4 Brigade, were civilians who had served with distinction in the First World War and then given devoted service in the Territorial Army.

Brigadier James Hargest, DSO, MC, ² a farmer and Member of Parliament, had in 1917–18 commanded most ably 2 Battalion, Otago Regiment. With 5 Brigade he was to be equally impressive, particularly during the withdrawal across **Crete** in 1941. Unfortunately he was captured by Rommel at **Sidi Azeiz** and, after a classic escape from **Italy** in 1943, was killed in **Normandy** while on a visit, as an observer, to 50 (Northumbrian) Division. His Brigade Major was Major Clifton. The battalion commanders had all served with distinction in 1914–18. Twenty-first Battalion was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Macky, MC, ³ an **Auckland** lawyer, 22 Battalion by Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, VC, ⁴ of the

¹ **Papakura**: C Sqn Div Cav Regt, **21 Bn**, HQ NZE (details), **7 Fd Coy**, Div Amn Coy (details), Forestry Coy.

Ngaruawahia: HQ NZA (details), HQ and two batteries **7 Anti-Tank Regt** (**15 LAD** attached), **5 Fd Regt** (16 LAD attached).

Palmerston North: **28 (Maori) Bn**.

Trentham: HQ NZ Div (details), Div Sigs (details), **22 Bn**, HQ 5 Inf Bde (4 and 5 Anti- Tank Coys, **17 LAD** attached), Div Pet Coy (details), Div Provost Coy (details), GHQ 2 Ech (details), 1 General Hospital, **1 Convalescent Depot**.

Burnham: 23 Bn, Div Supply Column (details), 5 Fd Amb, HQ Railway Construction and Maintenance Group, Railway Construction Coy, Railway Survey Coy.

² **Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Gk); born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; Member of Parliament, 1931–44; Otago Mtd Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 2 Bn, Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped Italy, Mar 1943; killed in action, France, 12 Aug 1944.**

³ **Lt-Col N. L. Macky, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 20 Feb 1891; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (Capt 1918); CO 21 Bn Jan 1940–May 1941.**

⁴ **Brig L. W. Andrew, VC, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Ashhurst, 23 Mar 1897; Regular soldier; Wellington Regt, 1915–19; CO 22 Bn Jan 1940–Feb 1942; comd 5 Bde 27 Nov–6 Dec 1941; Area Commander, Wellington, Nov 1943–Dec 1946; Commander, Central Military District, Apr 1948–Mar 1952.**

Regular Force, and 23 Battalion by Lieutenant-Colonel Falconer, DSO, MC, ¹ farmer and businessman. The senior artillerymen were Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser, ² a Wellington businessman, who commanded 5 Field Regiment, and Major Queree, ³ another professional soldier, who was second-in-command of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment (31 and 32 Batteries).

The specialist units had several of those civilian authorities of whom General Freyberg was afterwards to speak so highly. ⁴ The commander of 7 Field Company was Major Hanson, MM, ⁵ a graduate of Duntroon but at this time with the Public Works Department and an expert on road construction. Colonel McKillop ⁶ of 1 General Hospital had directed Sunnyside Hospital; Lieutenant-Colonel Kenrick ⁷ of 5 Field Ambulance and Major Boag ⁸ of the Convalescent Depot were medical practitioners. The Senior Chaplain to the Forces was the Rt. Rev. G. V. Gerard, MC, ⁹ Bishop of Waiapu.

In a month's time the battalions were joined by forestry and railway experts who had been called up to meet an urgent request from **Britain** for men with experience in the operation of sawmills and the construction of railways. On 14 February 6 officers and 185 other ranks marched into **Papakura Camp** to form 11 Forestry

¹ **Brig A. S. Falconer**, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born **Mosgiel**, 4 Nov 1892; tobacconist and secretary; Otago Regt 1914–19 (BM 2 NZ Inf Bde); CO **23 Bn** Jan–Aug 1940 and Mar–May 1941; comd 7 and 5 Inf Bdes in **UK**, 1940–41; NZ Maadi Camp Jun 1941–Oct 1942; 5 Div (in NZ) Dec 1942–Aug 1943; Overseas Commissioner, NZ Patriotic Fund Board, Nov 1943–Feb 1945.

² **Lt-Col K. W. Fraser**, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Edinburgh**, 1 Nov 1905; asst advertising manager; CO **5 Fd Regt**, 1940–41; wounded and p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

³ **Brig R. C. Queree**, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; born **Christchurch**, 28 Jun 1909; Regular soldier; Brigade Major, **NZ Artillery**, Oct 1940–Jun 1941; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun–Aug 1941, Jan–Jun 1942; CO **4 Fd Regt** Jun–Aug 1942; GSO I 2 NZ Div Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jan–Jun 1944; BGS NZ Corps 9 Feb–27 Mar 1944; CO **5 Fd Regt** Jun–Aug 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div, Aug 1944–Feb 1945, Mar–Jun 1945; QMG, Army HQ, 1948–50; Adjutant-General 1954–56; Vice-Chief of the General Staff Apr 1956–.

⁴ See p. 7.

⁵ **Brig F. M. H. Hanson**, DSO and bar, OBE, MM, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 1896; resident engineer, Main Highways Board; Wellington Regt in First World War; comd **7 Fd Coy**, NZE, Jan 1940–Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div May 1941, Oct 1941–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, **2 NZEF**, 1943–46; three times wounded; Commissioner of Works.

⁶ **Col A. C. McKillop**, m.i.d.; born **Scotland**, 9 Mar 1885;

Superintendent, Sunnyside Hospital, **Christchurch**; medical officer, **1 NZEF**, 1914–16; CO **1 Gen Hosp** Jan 1940– Jun 1941; ADMS Pacific Section, **2 NZEF (Fiji)** Aug 1941–Jul 1942; ADMS **1 Div (NZ)** Aug 1942–Mar 1943; died **Christchurch**, 5 Aug 1958.

⁷ **Brig H. S. Kenrick**, CB, CBE, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk); **Auckland**; born **Paeroa**, 7 Aug 1898; consulting obstetrician; Otago Regt 1916–19 (Capt); wounded Apr 1918; CO **5 Fd Amb** Dec 1939–May 1940; acting ADMS **2 NZEF**, Jun–Sep 1940; ADMS NZ Div Oct 1940–May 1942; DMS **2 NZEF** May–Sep 1942, Apr 1943–May 1945; Superintendent-in- Chief, **Auckland Hospital Board**.

⁸ **Lt-Col N. F. Boag**, ED; **Christchurch**; born **Leeston**, 13 Aug 1897; medical practitioner; CO **1 Conv Depot** Mar–Dec 1940.

⁹ **Rt. Rev. G. V. Gerard**, CBE, MC, m.i.d.; **Rotherham**, England; born **Christchurch**, 24 Nov 1898; Lt, **The Buffs**, 1918–19 (MC); SCF, **2 NZEF**, May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; repatriated Apr 1943; SCF, **2 NZEF (IP)**, Apr–Dec 1944.

Company. The commanding officer, Captain **Elliott**, ¹ had been the manager of a box factory; his officers were sawmillers and, in one case, a forestry graduate from the mahogany forests of the French Camerouns. The men, who had been chosen by the Forestry Department from hundreds of volunteers, represented all grades of general logging and sawmilling experience.

The same day 16 officers and 371 other ranks from the thousand volunteers of the Public Works and Railway Departments entered **Burnham** Camp to become Headquarters Railway Construction and Maintenance Group, 9 Railway Survey Company and 10 Railway Construction Company. The officers, whose lists of university degrees were just as impressive as those of any medical unit, were yet another proof of the accuracy of **General Freyberg's** contentions that one of the important features of **2 NZEF** was the civilian experience of so many senior officers. Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson, MC and bar, Croix de

Guerre,² who was to command the Group, had begun as a Public Works Department cadet and had been studying railway construction and bridge building in **Canada** when the First World War broke out. By 1918 he was with a division as acting Commander **Royal Engineers**. Since then he had worked in Mesopotamia and had been resident engineer for the Public Works Department in **Christchurch**. Ninth Survey Company was commanded by Major **Packwood**³ of the Public Works Department, who had been with the New Zealand Tunnelling Company in **France**. Major **Rabone**⁴ of 10 Railway Construction Company, an engineer of the last war, was well known for his work on railway construction and hydroelectric projects.

Both groups, railway and forestry, were immediately instructed in the elementary grammar of military training.

The battalions, having endured similar instruction, were now graduating to more technical exercises. **General Freyberg** had prepared a syllabus based on the eight weeks' training given to the militia in **Britain** and emphasising training for war as the keynote of all instruction. The shortage of equipment was just as curbing as it had been for the **First Echelon** but conditions in the

¹ **Lt-Col J. G. Elliott**; England; born NZ 8 Jan 1899; company manager; CO Forestry Gp Nov 1940–Jul 1943.

² **Lt-Col J. E. Anderson**, OBE, MC and bar, Croix de Guerre; born NZ 7 Dec 1890; civil engineer; CO NZ Ry C and M Gp 1940–42; later served with Royal Engrs; died Wellington, 5 Nov 1945.

³ **Col R. H. Packwood**, OBE; **Auckland**; born **Kaiapoi**, 11 Apr 1892; district engineer, Public Works Dept; OC 9 Ry Svy Coy 1940–41; Asst Director of Works (Docks), GHQ MEF, 1941–43; Director of Planning, Engr-in-Chief's Branch, GHQ India, 1943–46.

⁴ **Lt-Col T. C. V. Rabone**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Blenheim**12

Sep 1891; civil engineer; OC 10 Ry Constr Coy Jan 1940–Nov 1941; OC Engr and Ordnance Trg Depot, **Maadi**, Nov 1941–Apr 1942; CRE Central Military District 1942–43.

camps were rapidly improving. There was more parade space, the rifle ranges had been extended and more huts erected for recreation and accommodation.

At the same time there was always that atmosphere of haste and improvisation which suggests an early departure. The original plan had been for the second convoy to leave towards the end of March, with the divisional troops landing in Egypt and the railway and forestry companies going straight to **France**. Consequently all units were declared on active service and sent away for final leave by 14 March. But the date of departure was changed because it was found advisable to split the great convoy into a slow group and a fast group. The former would leave first with an Australian brigade; the latter would take the rest of the Australian contingent and the New Zealand echelon.

The only New Zealand unit sent with the first or slow convoy was an advance party ¹ from the railway and forestry companies under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson. They left **Wellington** for **Sydney** on 17 April and sailed from there in the **Orcades** for **Port Said** on the 27th. Their movements from that port were left as a problem for the Admiralty.

The rest of the echelon continued its training throughout April, with more vaccinations and such diversions as recruiting parades through the cities of the Dominion. There was, by then, a greater sense of urgency; the storm had broken and changed overnight the character of the war. **Denmark** and **Norway** had been invaded on 9 April; the naval engagements at Narvik had been fought; the British Expeditionary Force had landed in **Norway**. And in the **Mediterranean** theatre there was that wavering neutral, **Italy**.

In these circumstances the Admiralty insisted upon a concentration

of naval forces in the **Mediterranean**. To this end the escort for the second or fast convoy had to be reduced, even though New Zealand had requested the maximum protection for the convoys in which her troops were despatched. The Admiralty explained that because of the Norwegian operation the units of the German fleet, including the pocket battleships, had been located. The only possible danger would be from a merchant raider, for which the lighter escort would be adequate. Nevertheless, there still remained the possibility of **Italy** declaring war and closing the entrance to the **Red Sea**.

The Australian Government thereupon suggested that the troops should not embark until the situation had been clarified. The New Zealand Government did not think that the departure of the convoy

¹ Five officers and 29 other ranks from the Railway Construction and Maintenance Group; one officer and 15 other ranks from the Forestry Company.

should be postponed but it did ask for further information, including an indication of the 'probable steps that would be taken' should the convoy have to be diverted. Such information was already on the way. The convoys, the slow one already at sea and the fast one about to leave, would not, unless the situation improved, enter the **Red Sea**, nor would the troops be landed at **Basra** in the Persian Gulf. The ships would be diverted to **Britain**, where the troops would have better training facilities. The Dominions were asked to accept this suggestion and to continue with their plans for embarkation.

New Zealand agreed to this proposal but the Australian Government asked for a full appreciation of the situation from the Chiefs of Staff. The Australians wanted to know their part in 'the scheme of things', and they reminded the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs that such a possibility had 'long been referred to in Committee of Imperial Defence documents.' They also pointed out that their **6 Division** would be split, with one portion in **Palestine** and another in **Britain**. Though it was

imperative that they should be united for future operations, there was no certainty as to when this would take place. Moreover this diversion of troops to a theatre of war other than the **Middle East** 'might contravene the fulfilment of the decision as to the theatre in which an Imperial Force should serve.'

At this stage there was no time for any answer to reach New Zealand before the departure of the fast convoy. The Government adhered to the programme but appreciated the Australian point of view and the embarrassment that would result were ' **Australia** to take one course and New Zealand another.' It asked **Britain** for immediate advice and, as it always did, insisted upon receiving 'the most explicit assurances' as to the safety of the convoy. The Australian Government eventually decided that its troops should embark in the fast convoy. The appreciation of the Chiefs of Staff could be expected to arrive in time to allow the destination of the convoy to be altered when it reached **Fremantle**. As for the slow convoy, already at sea, there would be time for it to be diverted before it entered the **Red Sea**.

In the meantime the fast convoy had already left New Zealand with the **Second Echelon**, the railway construction and forestry companies and several hundred naval ratings. With them were Brigadier Barrowclough, DSO, MC, ¹ his Brigade Major, **Brooke**, ²

¹ Maj-Gen Rt. Hon. Sir Harold Barrowclough, PC, KCMG, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre (Fr); **Wellington**; born Masterton, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (CO 4 Bn); comd 7 NZ Inf Bde in **UK**, 1940; **6 Bde**, May 1940–Feb 1942; GOC **2 NZEF** in **Pacific** and 3 NZ Div, Aug 1942–Oct 1944; Chief Justice of New Zealand.

² **Col J. I. Brooke**, OBE, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born Dunedin, 20 Nov 1897; Regular soldier; **BM 6 Bde** May 1940–Aug 1941; GSO 13 NZ Div 1942–44.

and other members of the headquarters staff of 6 Brigade. They were to observe the methods used by the other brigades and be ready to train the brigade as soon as it arrived in the **Third Echelon**. The brigadier was an **Auckland** lawyer who, in 1914–18, had risen from private soldier to battalion commander. He returned to New Zealand early in 1942 after the campaigns in **Greece** and **Libya** to command **2 NZEF** in the **Pacific**, leaving the imprint of his high character on his brigade.

The troops had embarked, those at **Lyttelton** on the *Andes*, those at **Wellington** on the *Aquitania*, the *Empress of Britain* and the *Empress of Japan*.¹ At 6 a.m. on 2 May the great liners, together with HMS *Leander* and HMAS *Canberra*, slipped quietly away from their berths at **Wellington**, with the **Trentham** Camp Band playing to each ship in succession. They linked up in Cook Strait with the *Andes* and HMAS *Australia* from **Lyttelton** and set out for **Sydney**. Here they were joined by the *Queen Mary* and the *Empress of Canada* and sailed south to be joined by another transport from **Melbourne** and to arrive at **Fremantle** on 10 May, the very day that the slow convoy left that port for Colombo. The voyage, so far, had been without incident, living conditions were luxurious and the reception in **Fremantle** and **Perth** as enthusiastic as it had been and ever was to be for all New Zealand convoys.

The war situation was still serious but no worse than it had been when the convoy left New Zealand. On 4 May, when the Second Echelon was steaming across the **Tasman Sea**, the Dominion parliaments had received the promised appreciation of the war situation as seen by the Chiefs of Staff in **Britain**. They had reviewed the situation on all fronts and had considered that the possibility of a direct attack by **Japan** upon **Australia** and New Zealand was very remote. If the convoys were diverted and formations split, all possible steps would be taken to reassemble the forces. Neither India nor Kenya was suitable for training so the diversion, if it should take place, would have to be to the **United Kingdom**. The situation, however, was being watched from day to day and at the moment no diversion was necessary. This was a more confident statement than the Dominions expected. The Governments

were reassured though both made several reservations. They still demanded full information, they wanted the opportunity of deciding the ultimate destination of the convoys and they insisted upon strong escorts should the ships have to enter the more dangerous

¹ **Andes: 23 Bn**, HQ Ry C and M Gp, 9 Survey Coy, 10 Ry Constr Coy—1396 all ranks. **Empress of Japan: 21 Bn**, 135 all ranks RN—958 all ranks.

Empress of Britain: HQ 5 Bde, 22 Bn, 5 Anti-Tank Coy— 1622 all ranks.

Aquitania: 28 (Maori) Bn, 5 Fd Amb, Div Supply Column, 243 all ranks RNVR—2862 all ranks. The total number embarked was 6838 all ranks.

Atlantic. Once again it was apparent that the Dominions were not subordinates but members of a Commonwealth with equal status and equal rights.

On the basis of this appreciation the convoys left **Fremantle** for Egypt. The fast convoy left on 12 May and made steady progress towards Colombo, with the more serious soldiers listening to the wireless reports, well aware that the international situation was changing every hour. The 5 Brigade war diary records that, 'What news we did get was most disquieting.'

Germany had made an unexpected move across the European chessboard and the Allies had not been able to make any effective counter move. On 10 May **Holland, Belgium** and Luxembourg had been invaded. Mr Chamberlain had resigned and a Coalition Government had been formed with Mr Churchill as Prime Minister. On 13 May Churchill told the House of Commons and the world: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.' Next day the War Office announced that Local Defence Volunteers ¹ were to be raised in **Britain** and that **Holland** was about to capitulate. **Italy**, the political barometer of **Europe**, was showing no immediate change, but the British Government decided that

no more ships were to come through by way of **Aden** and the **Suez Canal**. The two convoys in the **Indian Ocean**—the slow and the fast—therefore turned south-west towards **Capetown**.

The fast convoy swung round from its course on the night of 15 May. The men, whose paybooks had been made out for a day in Colombo, learned of this change by observing that the morning sun was shining from another angle. The slow convoy went through to Colombo, left there and was diverted south on 19 May. Instead of being the advance party it was now four days behind the other convoy. In this order the ships moved south, with the Governments of two Dominions very apprehensive about the presence of German raiders in the South Atlantic and the Admiralty calling together for that portion of the voyage the most formidable escort it could assemble.

On the morning of 26 May the fast convoy and its escort were seen like another Armada by the surprised inhabitants of **Capetown**.² For five days the city showered upon the troops every hospitality it could offer. The Maori Battalion paid a visit from Simonstown and, as 5 Brigade's war diary records, 'They were a credit to their people and a marked example for the remainder of our troops.' The *Empress of Japan* was going no farther so her troops were
trans-

¹ From July 1940 they were known as the Home Guard.

² The *Queen Mary* and the *Aquitania* went to Simonstown, about 25 miles from **Capetown**.

ferred

to the other ships, which by the incredibly luxurious standards of 1940 were already classed as overcrowded. The naval unit went to the *Empress of Canada*; 21 Battalion to the *Empress of Britain*. Finally, on 30 May the slow convoy came into port.

Next day the fast convoy put out to sea, calling at **Freetown** and steaming on with increased precautions against attacks from U-boats and aircraft. The troops crowded about the loudspeakers and listened to the news from the **BBC**. The announcers were describing the evacuation that was taking place at **Dunkirk** and the approach of the panzer units towards **Paris**; on 10 June they announced the declaration of war by **Italy**. These tremendous events caused no alteration to the route. The convoy rounded Cape Verde at midnight and steamed north for the Irish Sea and increased naval protection. The war was closer now. The wreckage from torpedoed ships drifted past, a tanker stood on its stern with its bow above water, 'blazing like a torch'. The convoy, however, was not attacked, and on 16 June the ships anchored in the Clyde. The reception given to the Australian and New Zealand forces was genuinely warm, even pathetic in its expressions of gratitude. Their arrival after a voyage of 17,000 miles was dramatic enough to be classed as a triumph and to be featured as an example of unity within the Commonwealth. It was the opinion of **General Freyberg**, who had not wanted the **Second Echelon** diverted to **Britain**, that 'the arrival of the New Zealanders and Australians in the circumstances had been most opportune and had steadied the nation considerably.' There was little else to be confident about. The British offer of an Anglo-French union had been rejected, **M. Reynaud** had resigned, Marshal Pétain had formed a government to negotiate peace with **Germany**.

The men of the **Second Echelon**, however, were not unduly excited by the gravity of the international situation. They were too interested in the last stages of their Grand Tour, which began with a train journey to Edinburgh and ended in southern England with a march along tree-lined avenues to the tented camps of the **Aldershot** Command. The units of the brigade, now together for the first time, were in and about **Mytchett**; 1 General Hospital took over Pinewood Sanatorium near Wokingham and 1 **Convalescent Depot** staffed a camp reception hospital near **Farnborough**.

The railway and forestry companies went to **Woolmer**, where the

advance party left behind with the slow convoy at **Capetown** was already in quarters. This party's ships had left a day after the fast convoy, had called at **Dakar** and **Casablanca**, and on the collapse of **France** had been diverted from **Brest** to **Plymouth**. From there it had gone straight to **Woolmer** to receive the companies on 20 June.

This concentration in the **Aldershot** area was contrary to the original plan in which the base camp for **2 NZEF (UK)** was to have been in **Colchester** in **Essex**. But the senior officers ¹ who had been sent over from **Egypt** to prepare the camp and to organise the base had found the situation very different from that envisaged by **General Freyberg** in 1939. The defences in northern **France** had collapsed and **Colchester** was classed as a 'Battle Area', within which battalions would be dispersed as garrison troops in the coastal towns. As this would have been detrimental to their discipline and training, **General Freyberg** had suggested an area in the Southern Command. The War Office gave him the choice of **Winchester** with billets or **Aldershot** with tents. The General preferred **Winchester**, but the whole force could not be accommodated so **Aldershot** it had to be.

These plans had been made when the convoys were moving up the African coast and when the policy of the British Government was to give overseas troops every facility to complete their training. They were changed when the succession of disasters in **Europe** left the Germans free to plan the invasion of **Britain**. Thereafter, partly trained though it was, the echelon became part of the defence of the country. The New Zealand Government recognised this state of emergency but stipulated that the troops should have adequate equipment and be a separate formation, under the command of the GOC of the war area in which they were placed and not under the command of any British divisional commander. So, from 17 June, **2 NZEF (UK)** was a separate formation, ² under the operational control of the War Office and, from 24 June, responsible for No. 3 section of the **Aldershot** defence system.

In the meantime **General Freyberg** had been waiting in **Maadi** until he was certain that **Italy's** entry into the war did not mean an

immediate threat to Egypt and the immediate use of the First Echelon. He was then able to leave Brigadier Puttick in command and fly to **Britain** to take over **2 NZEF (UK)**. With France crumbling, all regular air routes were blocked but a place was found for him in an aircraft that was taking some very important diplomatic

¹ On 14 June HQ **2 NZEF (UK)** had the following officers from the **Middle East**: Brig R. Miles (Commander), Maj C. S. J. Duff (GSO II), Maj A. W. Greville (AA & QMG), **Brig N. S. Falla** (Brig i/c Administration), Col K. MacCormick (ADMS), Lt-Col S. H. Crump (CRASC), Lt-Col T. J. King (DADOS). Colonel Sir Stephen Allen (Military Secretary) had been in **Britain** since the declaration of war. The GSO I, Colonel Stewart, who left Egypt on 26 June, had a difficult and hazardous journey by air and sea and did not take over until 25 August.

² Brigadier Miles, who had been sent over from Egypt, commanded **2 NZEF (UK)** until the arrival of **General Freyberg** on 24 June.

mail. In it he was taken up the **Nile** to **Khartoum**, westwards to Kano and north via obscure petrol points in the Sahara to **Oran**, and thence to **Lisbon**, Exeter and, on 24 June, to **London**.

Until then his policy had always been that his force should not go into action unless it was adequately equipped and thoroughly trained. But after a visit to the War Office he informed the New Zealand Government that 'There is a desperate shortage of equipment and for some time to come we shall be short of many of our weapons. This is the common lot of most troops here; nevertheless in spite of this I feel, and I am sure that Cabinet will agree with me, that New Zealand troops must be prepared to accept battle upon uneven terms in defence of Great Britain.' He knew that should there be an invasion the first question the people of New Zealand would ask would be, 'What part did our men take?' After this correspondence all questions concerning the role of **2 NZEF (UK)** were left to him. He returned to the War Office to say, 'My

Government want you to give us as much equipment as you can spare, and would wish you to cast the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in the role in which you may consider us to be of greatest assistance at the present moment.' Thereupon the force became part of GHQ Reserve. 'The great hunt for stores and equipment was also on forthwith. We found conditions infinitely worse than in New Zealand—no new weapons, no ammunition, no transport. The BEF had lost everything in **France** and, naturally, had priority in refitting. It was almost heartbreaking but we carried on for the first week and the equipment started trickling in.' ¹ The first issue of equipment was received on 28 June; next day **2 NZEF (UK)** was placed at eight hours' notice because an invasion was thought possible that coming weekend.

There was no suggestion that the **First Echelon** should be brought over from Egypt. Such plans had been shelved when **Italy** entered the war and challenged **Britain's** control of the **Mediterranean**. The echelon would stay where it was and there be joined by the Third Echelon, which was due to leave New Zealand in August. The **Second Echelon** would remain in **Britain** until mid-August at least, or until the danger of attack on England was over. Until then only those units not actually required in the defence of **Britain** would leave in the convoys that were being so boldly despatched to the **Middle East**.

Shortly after this decision the Convalescent Depot and Railway Construction and Maintenance Group were warned to prepare for a move overseas. The former had to hand over its hospital to 1

¹ 5 Brigade war diary, June 1940.

General Hospital and that unit, in its turn, had to select some of its staff for immediate service in the **Middle East**. They entrained for the Clyde on 3 August, the railwaymen embarking at **Gourock** on the *Franconia* and the medical staffs at **Glasgow** on the *Andes*. This convoy, taking the route via **Capetown**, did not reach Egypt until mid-September.

The rest of the echelon spent their time training for their role in the defence of **Britain**. **General Freyberg** had given the officers an inspiring survey of the military situation; the press and Mr Churchill warned everyone that each weekend was a potential crisis. And history seemed to be repeating itself with some romantic variations. On 6 July the battalions were inspected by King George VI, and men with imagination and some slight knowledge of history thought of Elizabeth I at **Tilbury** or of George III reviewing his regiments when they were waiting for the forces of Napoleon.

At this stage the battalions and detachments of reinforcements with the **Second Echelon** had been organised into **2 NZEF (UK)**, with a Force Headquarters and three groups. Headquarters Covering Force (Brigadier Miles) had C Squadron of the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, a machine-gun company and an infantry battalion commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser and made up of the men from the two batteries of 5 Field Regiment and the two batteries of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment that were still without guns. The Mixed Brigade ¹ (Brigadier Barrowclough) was formed from 28 (Maori) Battalion and 29 (or Composite) Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **McNaught** ²) organised from the unattached infantry reinforcements. The third group was 5 Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Hargest). Fourth Anti-Tank Company was attached to the Mixed Infantry Brigade and 5 Anti-Tank Company to 5 Infantry Brigade.

There was still an acute shortage of arms, vehicles and equipment. Fifth Field Regiment had only one battery: a collection of 18-pounder guns and 4.5-inch howitzers. The anti-tank companies had been given the Bedford 30-cwt trucks, sheeted with $\frac{5}{8}$ inch steel plate and equipped with Bren guns and anti-tank rifles. C Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** had six light tanks and six Bren carriers. The **Army Service Corps** details, men from the Petrol and Ammunition Companies, had motor lorries, but for the transportation of troops 8 and 9 Motor Coach Companies had been attached from the Royal **Army Service Corps**. With their enormous camouflaged buses they could lift the whole force in one move.

¹ From 7 August known as 7 Infantry Brigade.

² **Lt-Col G. J. McNaught**, DSO, ED; **New Plymouth**; born **Wanganui**, 26 Nov 1896; schoolmaster; NZ MG Corps 1916–19 (2 Lt, 1919); CO 29 Bn (**UK**) Jun 1940–Mar 1941; **25 Bn** Sep–Dec 1941; wounded 23 Nov 1941; headmaster, **New Plymouth Boys' High School**.

On 17 July, when the force was finally organised, it came under the control of the Commander-in-Chief Home Forces and with **1 Canadian Division** and **1 Armoured Division** formed **7 Corps** under the command of Major-General A. G. L. McNaughton. Their allotted task was 'to counter-attack and destroy any enemy force invading the counties of **Surrey-Kent- Sussex**-Hampshire which was not destroyed by the troops of the Eastern and Southern Commands.'

As this landing was thought likely to take place at any moment the training of **2 NZEF (UK)** had to be unconventional. Instead of the regular stages of section, platoon, company, battalion, brigade and finally divisional exercises, the order was reversed. The syllabus began with divisional training on the assumption that the troops were already trained soldiers. They practised moving by motor transport to their defence areas and trained by doing tactical exercises on the spot.

The first large-scale exercise took place on 18–22 July. Three convoys of buses moved off in drizzling rain for Ashdown Forest to the south-west of Tunbridge Wells. The brigades then had to cover the southern approaches to Crowborough and to counter-attack any landings on the south coast east of the River Ouse. With wind and rain to encourage them, they dug in and learnt by unpleasant experience how to bivouac in the open. They repelled hypothetical assaults on the beaches or overwhelmed imaginary parachutists landing on the South Downs. The exercise ended with a solid route march, a night embussing and a move back to **Aldershot**.

General Freyberg then went ruthlessly through all the mistakes with his officers and NCOs. Everyone had learnt something; he was certain that his force could move by MT, deploy into position and have behind it an organisation that ran sufficiently smoothly to keep the fighting troops from starving or running short of ammunition. Altogether he thought the exercise had been ‘a remarkable performance.’

It was repeated on 28–31 July with the Mixed Brigade (7 Brigade) as an enemy who was advancing towards **London**. Fifth Brigade, assisted by I tanks but harried by low-flying aircraft, fought its way eastwards towards Crowborough and ended the exercise with a dawn attack in the East Grinstead area.

The infantry then marched through the area they were to hold should the invasion take place. For another week of that sunlit August they marched over the Downs and across the Weald. Those who remembered the distance from New Zealand, the youth of the Dominion and the past history of the counties they were detailed to defend realised that they were taking part in a great romance. The General thought that, as a spectacle, nothing equalled this long march across **Sussex**. Through his ‘*méthode naturelle*’ the battalions had become magnificent instruments of war. He afterwards could say: ‘Perhaps the most extraordinary part of this English adventure was the rapid and successful training of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force.... I am certain that in two months they had become a fully trained fighting force, capable of taking their part in any offensive. This is a tribute to their excellent qualities and their natural adaptability. In any case ... although the times were hard, and the move of our men interfered with the concentration of the Division, I am very glad they went to Great Britain. They saw the people at a time of crisis, and in their small way inspired confidence in England at a time when the Homeland had few friends, if any, other than her people from overseas.’

At the same time the force was steadily acquiring greater fire power. Seventh Anti-Tank Regiment had two-pounders; 5 Field Regiment had

the new 25-pounders and some French 75-millimetre guns; the **Army Service Corps** units had at least 50 per cent of their regular transport; and the infantry had almost 100 per cent of their equipment. Once strengthened, the brigades were tested again, on the South Downs on 27–29 August. The troops returned to **Aldershot**, expecting soon to leave for the **Middle East**.

They did not know that the relative importance of the **Pacific** and the **Middle East** had just been decided,¹ or that the Third Echelon had left **Wellington** on 27 August. But they did know that Headquarters 6 Brigade² was about to leave for Egypt, and that the War Office had stated that the echelon would leave **Aldershot** on or after 15 September. The Commander-in-Chief of the Home Forces, General Sir Alan Brooke, inspected the force preparatory to its departure; Mr Churchill appeared on 4 September to fulfil a promise of a similar inspection. Both were impressed and said so.

But to everyone's surprise, on 4 September all preparations for departure were abruptly halted. Late that night **General Freyberg** was asked by GHQ Home Forces if the echelon could be retained in an operational role. The Intelligence Staff was almost certain that a landing on the south-east coast was imminent. For days the *Luftwaffe* had been attempting to eliminate the **Royal Air Force**, there was an ominous concentration of shipping across the Channel, and September was the month with favourable tides and phases of the moon. To meet the threat every available unit was being transferred to the southern counties.

¹ See Chapter 3, pp. 48–9.

² HQ 6 Brigade had travelled with the **Second Echelon**. Brigadier Barrowclough relinquished command of 7 Brigade on 26 August and, with some of his staff, left by sea for **Capetown**. From there he went to **Durban** by rail and thence to **Cairo** by air, arriving on 13 October, two weeks after his brigade had arrived with the **Third Echelon**. The others of his party went by sea from

In this emergency the **Second Echelon** was an obvious choice, for it had been training for the last two months as a mobile force, complete with all reserves of ammunition and three days' supplies. **General Freyberg** consequently gave his consent and thereby postponed the concentration of his Division in the **Middle East**.

The order from GHQ Home Forces ran as follows: 'Emergency Move. NZ Force and 8 R Tanks under command **General Freyberg** will move to area EAST of TUNBRIDGE WELLS to be selected by Commander **12 Corps**. On arrival this area FORCE will come under command of **12 Corps** and will be held in reserve for counter offensive role.' For further information the General went to GHQ Home Forces, where he learnt what the commander had not been willing to say over the telephone—that after the heavy bombardment of **Dover** from Gris Nez, Mr Churchill had ordered that if an invasion took place and **Dover** was captured it must be retaken at all costs. To take part in this all-important counter-attack the New Zealand brigades were being transferred to the outskirts of the **Dover- Folkestone** area. The signals strength for this role was increased by 100 British signallers who had served in **France** or **Norway**, 8 Royal Tank Regiment came under command and, after 12 September, 157 Anti-Aircraft Battery.

The brigades left **Aldershot** late on 5 September, stopping and starting all through the night, listening to the drone of aircraft on their way to bomb **London** and eventually settling down under cover in the woods before first light. East of **Maidstone** there was 5 Brigade, north of the **Maidstone-Charing** road was 7 Brigade, now commanded by Brigadier Falconer, and at Charing there was **Milforce**, an armoured group, commanded by Brigadier Miles and formally constituted the following morning.

Their instructions were specific and detailed. Seventh Brigade would deal with airborne landings in the Chatham- **Maidstone** area; **Milforce**

and 5 Brigade would prepare to counter-attack in the direction of **Dover** and **Folkestone**. They immediately carried out exercises along all possible routes. There was no need to emphasise their importance. With the **Battle of Britain** then reaching its climax, the exercises were obviously rehearsals for what might take place in the next few hours. The days began with stand-to at dawn; the training exercises went on with bomber formations roaring over towards **London** and fighter screens weaving their vapour trails across the autumn skies; and then dusk came down with all troops standing-to again.

The week passed by with the air battle increasing in intensity, but the echelon still expected that it would be withdrawn in time to leave for the **Middle East** with an October convoy. On 12 September, however, Churchill postponed the date of sailing for a week and the actual withdrawal from **Kent** until 19 September. The culminating date was 15 September. 'On this day the **Luftwaffe**, after two heavy attacks on the 14th, made its greatest concentrated effort in a resumed daylight attack on **London**.' ¹ Mr Churchill thereupon decided that the force must remain in **Kent**; only when all dangers of an invasion were over was it to go overseas. He has since stated that, 'By the middle of September the invasion menace seemed sufficiently glaring to arrest further movement of vital units to the East, especially as they had to go round the Cape. After a visit to the **Dover** sector, where the electric atmosphere was compulsive, I suspended for a few weeks the dispatch of the New Zealanders and the remaining two tank battalions to the **Middle East**.' ²

This decision forced **General Freyberg** to choose, for the second time that year, the theatre of war in which it was most necessary for him to be. In Kent he had the **Second Echelon**, nearly 7000 men, waiting to counter-attack a German landing. In the **Middle East** the Italian **Tenth Army** had crossed the Egyptian border on 14 September and was advancing towards **Sidi Barrani**. This meant that the **First Echelon** (4 Brigade Group), only partially equipped and strung out along the line of communication, was presumably about to be engaged in a major battle. ³ The **Third Echelon** (6 Brigade) was on its way to the **Middle East** to be

trained and equipped. Convinced that any invasion would fail ⁴ and confident about the ability of the **Second Echelon**, he decided to return to Egypt. With the somewhat reserved permission of Mr Churchill, **General Freyberg** and Colonel Stewart left by air on the night of 22–23 September. The forecast for the night read, ‘No wind in Channel, sea calm, invasion imminent, all precautions to be put into effect.’ In spite of a crash landing on **Malta** airfield, they reached **Divisional Headquarters** at **Baggush** in the **Western Desert** on 25 September.

The units left in **Kent** carried on as before. On 8 October 7 Brigade was disbanded ⁵ so that **2 NZEF (UK)**, commanded first by Brigadier Miles and then by Brigadier Hargest, consisted of 5 Brigade and **Milforce**. Otherwise there were few changes. The battalions still stood-to at dawn and at dusk. There were several casualties during the air raids but more from accidents during the

¹ Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. II, p. 293.

² Ibid., p. 410.

³ See Chapter 3.

⁴ In his cables to the **New Zealand Government General Freyberg** had always stated that a German invasion would be an act of desperation, doomed to failure.

⁵ 28 (Maori) Battalion went to **Milforce**, 29 Battalion to 5 Brigade. **Milforce** was commanded by Lt-Col E. C. N. Custance, **8 Royal Tanks**, and after the attachment of 28 Battalion, by Lt-Col Dittmer. Lt-Col Falconer took over 5 Brigade from Brig Hargest.

‘blackout’. Those on leave could be in **London** during the raids; others in **Canterbury** were thanked by the Chief Constable for their assistance, and in another town an NCO with a small party was thanked

for recovering bodies from wrecked buildings.

Even so, 5 Brigade's war diary records that October 1940 was 'one of the happiest months spent overseas.' The troops were billeted with private families or lived in barns, oast-houses and requisitioned dwellings. Games ¹ were organised and enjoyed, even if Routine Orders could read: 'Final Match at Watchett's Recreation Ground, ... **23 Bn** to provide AA defence, medical personnel and to mark and clear the ground.'

There was no suggestion of any major move to the **Middle East**. The only New Zealand troops to go with that month's convoy were the staff of 1 General Hospital, detachments from different headquarters, small sections of artillerymen, engineers and Army Service Corps drivers, all under the command of Captain **Grigg**, ² and a group of senior officers, Brigadiers Miles and Falla and Lieutenant- Colonel Crump. Their convoy left the Clyde on 7 October and was attacked from the air, the *Oronsay* being hit by bombs and escorted back to Greenock. The 363 New Zealanders on board, none of whom was hurt, had a week's survivors leave and then by leisurely stages in different camps appeared again at **Aldershot**. The other two ships rounded the Cape with the convoy and reached Port **Tewfik** on 16 November.

The next convoy was due to leave in November, but there were 100,000 competitors and capacity for only 30,000 men. In any case, priority was being given to armoured regiments, artillery and anti-aircraft units. Everything was based on the precise requirements in the **Middle East** and they could not be assessed until the date of sailing. Consequently the British Government would not promise that the echelon would leave even with the December convoy.

But there was some suggestion of the move. October was now drawing to a close, winter was approaching and the Germans could not attempt an invasion until the summer of 1941. The echelon, with billets cleaned and all accounts paid, moved from **Kent** to the **Aldershot** area, there to continue training and await orders to embark.

No one left in November, but the artillery and the advance parties from the battalions were selected for the December convoy. Guns and equipment, trucks and Bren carriers were taken to the transports

¹ 23 Battalion was informed through Routine Orders that the right to kill rabbits in Milgate Park had been sold to a man who earned his livelihood as a trapper. There was to be no more snaring, ferreting or shooting of rabbits in the battalion area.

² Maj A. N. Grigg, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 16 Nov 1896; Member of Parliament, 1938–41; killed in action 29 Nov 1941.

at Liverpool; detachments, each of one NCO and thirteen other ranks, went with LMGs to the different ships as anti-aircraft gunners. They sailed on 17 December: 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, less 33 and 34 Batteries already in Egypt, from Avonmouth in the *Rangitiki*; 5 Field Regiment in the *City of London* and advance parties in the *Elizabethville*, both from Liverpool. With congested living conditions, winter weather and the close proximity of enemy raiders it was not a pleasant voyage. On Christmas Day the convoy was attacked and had to scatter for a time; at **Freetown** the troops, in spite of the oppressive heat, slept below deck to escape from the mosquitoes. There was no further trouble along the route to the Cape, to **Durban** and to **Port Tewfik**, and on 18 February 1941 the regiments marched into **Helwan Camp** and the artillery of the Division was complete for the first time.

In the **Aldershot** area there now remained HQ **2 NZEF (UK)**, 5 Brigade, and several specialist units still training, still marching and still being inspected. On 27 November HRH the Princess Royal, as Colonel-in-Chief, Royal Signals, reviewed the **Divisional Signals** unit at **Mytchett** and set a standard of thorough inspection that was remembered until the end of the war. The other two events for which all were preparing were Christmas in **Britain** and the approaching embarkation for the **Middle East**. Leave for all was not practicable but 50 per cent of the men had leave before Christmas, a small number dined at

the New Zealand Services Club and others went to private homes. For the rest there was Christmas dinner in camp and parcels from the New Zealand Patriotic Council as some consolation for the severity of the weather. New Year saw similar hospitality, more frozen pipes and more skating, the same draughty billets and a mild epidemic of influenza. But in the first four days of January baggage was loaded and the battalions left for Newport or Liverpool.

The *Duchess of Bedford* took 2781 all ranks from Newport on 7 January and steamed up the Irish Sea and into Belfast Lough off Bangor the next day. The *Athlone Castle*, with 1480 all ranks, left Liverpool on 7 January but remained anchored off the coast of North Wales until the 11th, when she joined the convoy that was assembling in Belfast Lough. In several other ships 112 other ranks sailed as anti-aircraft defence parties and 10 officers and 404 other ranks sailed in the ships carrying the transport vehicles. The only troops left in **Britain** were the Base Details, ¹ approximately 90 all ranks.

¹ On 22 February 1941 Base Details went to **Aldershot** and thence to **Avonmouth**, en route for the **Middle East**. But, after their ship had touched a derelict and put into the Clyde, they were transferred by sea to Liverpool and so to a nearby military camp. They sailed again on 23 April from Liverpool. At Durban they spent a month in another military camp, met a New Zealand detachment of 200 men who had come south as guard on a ship with Italian prisoners of war and left on 10 June, reaching **Port Tewfik** on the 20th.

With a strong air and naval escort the convoy of over twenty ships left on 12 January, calling at **Freetown** and sailing south, one section steaming on to **Durban** and the other, which included the New Zealand ships, berthing for five delightful days in **Capetown**. The convoy eventually reassembled off **Durban** and reached Port **Tewfik** on 3 March. The men from the *Athlone Castle* entered **Helwan Camp** the next day. The majority of those in the *Duchess of Bedford* disembarked on 5 March, but rough seas for the next two days kept 21 Battalion on board

until 8 March.

By then the other battalions had endured their first route march, even though many of them did not have such tropical equipment as shorts, hose-tops and sun helmets. They were being reorganised. Twenty-ninth Battalion ¹ was broken up, some men going to the units of 5 Brigade, others to the training battalions. The Reconnaissance Battalion, the core of which had been formed in **Britain** from 4 and 5 Anti-Tank Companies, was disbanded and the men drafted to the training battalions.

Still more important, on 7 March Brigadier Hargest told all ranks that their stay in Egypt would be short. In fact, some of the transport vehicles had not yet come up from the ships at **Port Tewfik** when the brigade received its warning orders. The battalions left **Helwan** on 17 March, this time for **Alexandria** and the campaign in **Greece**.

¹ As late as 1943 beer was being drawn for this disbanded battalion.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 3 – THIRD ECHELON JOINS THE FIRST

CHAPTER 3

Third Echelon joins the First

IN May–July 1940, when the **Second Echelon** was at sea or being hurriedly equipped at **Aldershot**, the **Third Echelon** had been assembling in New Zealand. The officers and NCOs, having trained with the **Second Echelon**, were already in camp when the main drafts ¹ marched in on 15–17 May to form 6 Infantry Brigade, the attached units and some 3000 reinforcements.

With Brigadier Barrowclough and his staff in **Britain**, the new formation was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Wilder, DSO, MC, ² of 25 Battalion. He had served with distinction on **Gallipoli** and in **Palestine** and had then returned to civilian life—in his case to sheep-farming. The other commanders represented the younger generation of New Zealanders who had to provide the possible replacements in what was obviously going to be a long war. Lieutenant-Colonels Shuttleworth ³ and **Page**, ⁴ both graduates of the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, and members of the New Zealand Staff Corps, commanded 24 and 26 Battalions respectively; Lieutenant-Colonel **Weir**, ⁵ once in the Survey Department and afterwards a graduate of the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, commanded 6 Field Regiment.

¹ **Trentham**: HQ NZ Div (details), **8 Fd Coy**, Div Sigs (details), HQ **6 Bde** (details, with 19 LAD attached), **6 A-Tk Coy**, **25 Bn**, Div Provost Coy, Overseas Base (details), Base Pay Office (details), Base Post Office (details), Base Depot, **2 Gen Hosp**, Reinforcements (1228 all ranks).

Papakura: **6 Fd Regt** (18 LAD attached), 33 Bty 7 A-Tk Regt, **24 Bn**, Overseas Base (details), Base Pay Office (details), Reinforcements (1136 all ranks).

Burnham: **26 Bn**, C Section Div Amn Coy, Div Pet Coy (details), Div Sup Coln (details), **6 Fd Amb**, Overseas Base (details), Base Pay Office (details), Reinforcements (1167 all ranks).

² **Maj-Gen A. S. Wilder**, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Order of the White Eagle (Serb); Te Hau, **Waipukurau**; born NZ 24 May 1890, sheep-farmer; Major, Wgtn Mtd Rifles, 1914–19; CO **25 Bn** May 1940–Sep 1941; comd NZ Trg Group, **Maadi Camp**, Sep–Dec 1941, Jan–Feb 1942; **5 Bde** 6 Dec 1941–17 Jan 1942; 5 Div (in NZ) Apr 1942–Jan 1943; 1 Div Jan–Nov 1943.

³ **Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth**, DSO, m.i.d.; born Wakefield, **Nelson**, 19 Jan 1907; Regular soldier; CO **24 Bn** Feb 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; died **UK**, 15 May 1945.

⁴ **Brig J. R. Page**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Dunedin, 10 May 1908; Regular soldier; CO **26 Bn** May 1940–Nov 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941; Commander, Northern Military District, 1950–52; Adjutant-General, 1952–54; QMG 1956–.

⁵ **Maj-Gen C. E. Weir**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO **6 Fd Regt** Sep 1939–Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941–Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commander, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, Nov 1951–Aug 1955; Chief of General Staff Aug 1955–.

The medical officers were, as usual, a strong group with military experience and impressive civilian qualifications. Lieutenant-Colonel **Bull**, ¹ a **Wellington** surgeon, commanded 6 Field Ambulance, and Lieutenant-Colonel **Spencer**, ² of **Wellington**, was in charge of 2 General Hospital.

For them and for the men they were to command there were more comfortable quarters and better facilities for training than there had been for the other echelons, but the greatest difference was the sense of urgency aroused by the disastrous course of the war in **Europe**. The officers and NCOs had marched into camp shortly after the German invasion of **Norway** and **Denmark**; they were training on 10 May when the German armies entered the Low Countries and began the campaign

that was to end with the evacuation from **Dunkirk** and the capitulation of **France**.

The general public was sensitive in its turn. People were now expressing their opinions about the war effort in greater volume and with more asperity. The newspapers, public bodies and the Returned Soldiers' Association called for drastic measures; on 23 May news was received of the British Emergency Powers Bill which placed all persons and property at the disposal of the state. The following day Mr Fraser ³ announced that similar measures would be introduced in New Zealand. They would mean compulsory national service, civil, military and financial. He thought that the country would welcome such a decision; the serious nature of the war demanded it and no other means would be effective. The Government and the Parliamentary Labour Party were discussing the necessity of a 'national' Government.

These statements restored public confidence, even when the ensuing week saw the surrender of the Belgian Army and the evacuation of **Dunkirk**. But they meant two startling changes in the traditional policy of the Labour Government—the introduction of conscription and the admission ⁴ of the National Party to some share in the direction of the war effort. The Prime Minister who had the strength of mind to make such important decisions was equally resolute when stating his reasons for them. On 30 May,

¹ **Brig W. H. B. Bull**, CBE, ED; **Wellington**; born **Napier**, 19 May 1897; surgeon; **CO 6 Fd Amb** Feb 1940–May 1941; **ADMS NZ Div** May 1941; p.w. 28 May 1941; **DGMS**, Army HQ, 1947–57.

² **Col F. M. Spencer**, OBE, m.i.d.; born **Rotorua**, 3 Oct 1893; medical practitioner; **NZMC**, **1 NZEF**, 1914–19 (Capt); **CO 2 Gen Hosp** Apr 1940–Jun 1943; died North Africa, Jun 1943.

³ Prime Minister since 1 April after the death of Mr Savage on 26 March 1940.

⁴ On 16 July Mr Fraser announced the agreement to form a War Cabinet of five members, three from the Labour Government, two from the Opposition. This body would decide and direct the war effort; the general Cabinet would continue to function in the normal way.

when Parliament was discussing the Emergency Regulations Bill, he made the following statement:

Provision will be made for the compulsory system right away. The question of when it will be applied will depend upon the conditions in regard to the Forces; it will depend entirely on the conditions in regard to the number at present volunteering, and the number that will be available during the next few months. Apart from everything else, however, the country feels at the present time in this crisis that the voluntary system, even if completely successful, does not apply fairly and does not embody that spirit of service that the country demands. There is that feeling—a feeling that must be shared by all, including even some of us who were strong anti-conscriptionists under ordinary conditions, for it is the life of the Commonwealth for which we are fighting at the present time. If I am aboard a sinking ship and I am asked to go to the pumps, and if another chap does not want to go to the pumps I will certainly compel him to do his best at least to save the ship. That is how I look upon the matter and that is how the Government looks upon it. If the house is on fire, we cannot start arguing about whether the other chap will help or not, but we can do our best to induce him to help. I am not going to reflect upon those who have conscientious objections to killing and would rather be killed than kill ... but ... it is quite impossible to carry on efficiently without compulsion; I say that quite definitely.

The 22nd July 1940 was the last day for voluntary enlistment in **2 NZEF**. By then the total number of voluntary enlistments was 59,644.

Another result of the collapse of **France** and the declaration of war by **Italy** was the formation of several new units. **Britain** had asked if 'in

the present grave situation' the Dominion could provide, in addition to those non-divisional troops already overseas, ¹ more foresters, railwaymen and engineers. The Government had immediately called for volunteers from the Forestry, Railway and Public Works Departments. By the end of June 14 and 15 Forestry Companies were at **Trentham**; Headquarters Railway Operating Group, ² 16 and 17 Railway Operating Companies and 13 Railway Construction Company were at **Ngaruawahia**. To form the required companies of engineers 8 Field Company ³ had been more or less disbanded; the men were still at **Trentham** but they had been redrafted according to qualifications into 18 and 19 Army Troops Companies.

¹ 11 Forestry Company and the Railway Construction and Maintenance Group had sailed with the **Second Echelon**, reaching **Britain** in June. The Railway Group left for the **Middle East** in August.

² There was to have been 12 Railway Survey Company but there was no immediate need for it in the **Middle East**. The men were used to form 36 Survey Battery, part of the 3rd Section of the **4th Reinforcements**. (See *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 227-8.)

³ 8 Field Company, when re-formed, went to **Fiji** and then to the **Middle East** with the 3rd Section of the **4th Reinforcements**. Its place in the Division during the **Greece** campaign was filled by 19 Army Troops Company, a non-divisional unit.

To command these specialist units there were again civilians with invaluable technical experience. Major **Lincoln** ¹ of 18 Army Troops Company was an engineer from **Auckland**; Major **Langbein**, ² who commanded 19 Army Troops Company, was an engineer in the Public Works Department. The Railways Department was the natural source for the officers of the Railway Operating Group. The Group's commander was Lieutenant-Colonel Sage, MM; ³ Captain **Aickin** ⁴ had 16 Railway Operating Company and Major **Poole** ⁵ 17 Railway Operating Company.

The additional construction company that was being sent over, 13 Railway Construction Company, was commanded by Captain R. T. **Smith**,⁶ a civil engineer. All four commanding officers had served for several years with **1 NZEF**.

The movement and ultimate destination of these companies was not decided for some weeks. The railwaymen, being required in the **Middle East**, could travel with the **Third Echelon**. The engineers and forestry men, both urgently needed in **Britain**, were to have travelled there by way of **Canada** but the plan was shelved because no naval escort was available in the North Pacific. In the end it was decided that only the Forestry Companies would go to **Britain**; they would travel with the **Third Echelon** as far as Colombo and there be transferred to a homeward-bound convoy. The engineers would go no farther than the **Middle East**, 19 Army Troops Company with the **Third Echelon**, 18 Army Troops Company with the **4th Reinforcements**.

By July, however, there were serious doubts about the wisdom of sending any troops away from New Zealand. In the original plan the New Zealand Division was to operate from a base in **Britain**, and by the unpredictable chances of war the **Second Echelon** was already there. But it was now extremely unlikely that the First Echelon could ever be sent over from the **Middle East**. Nor was there any promise that either the First or the **Third Echelon** would

¹ **Lt-Col L. A. Lincoln**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 14 Sep 1902; civil engineer; OC 18 Army Tps Coy Jul 1940–Jan 1942; **7 Fd Coy** Jan–Sep 1942; DCRE No. 8 Works, RE, Sep 1942–Aug 1943; CRE No. 56 Works, RE, Aug 1943–Nov 1944.

² **Maj C. Langbein**, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Nelson**, 12 Oct 1894; Public Works Dept engineer; **1 NZEF** 1914–19; OC 19 A Tps Coy Aug 1940–Jul 1942; OC NZ Engr Trg Depot 1942–43.

³ **Lt-Col A. H. Sage**, OBE, MM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born NZ 1 Dec 1893; railway officer; Auck Regt, 1915–19 (Lt); CO NZ Ry Op

Gp Aug 1940–Jun 1943.

⁴ **Maj F. W. Aickin**, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Onehunga**, 7 Jul 1894; barrister and solicitor (Law Officer, NZ Govt Rlys); NZE, Sigs Coy, 1914–19 (2 Lt, 1918); OC 16 Ry Op Coy Aug 1940–Jun 1943; past General Manager, NZ Govt Rlys.

⁵ **Maj G. T. Poole**; born NZ 3 Jul 1896; railway clerk; NZ Rifle Bde, 1915–19 (2 Lt, 1919); OC 17 Ry Op Coy 1940–42.

⁶ **Lt-Col R. T. Smith**, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Thames**, 4 Jul 1895; civil engineer; 1 **NZEF**, 1915–18; OC 13 Ry Constr Coy Jun 1940–Dec 1942; CO NZ Ry Constr Gp Dec 1942–Jun 1943; CRE Indian Works Unit in **India**, **Burma** and **Malaya**, 1944–46.

on its arrival in **Britain** be fully equipped and thoroughly trained. To the **New Zealand Government** the wisest move seemed to be to divert a brigade group to **Fiji** and retain the remainder of the **Third Echelon** until more equipment was available in **Britain**.

This cautious attitude was due to the rapid deterioration of the situation in the **Far East**. Relations between **Japan** and the British Commonwealth were now unstable and there were indications that **Japan**, in order to achieve her ambitions in **Asia** and throughout the **Pacific**, was carefully estimating the possible advantages to be gained by calculated aggression. Moreover, **Britain** admitted that the fall of **France** and the declaration of war by **Italy** had wrecked the balance of naval strength in European waters. Without the French Navy she could not blockade the German and Italian fleets and, at the same time, despatch a fleet to the **Far East**. This gave **Japan** ‘a chance which could only occur once in a thousand years.’¹ Fortunately such aggression required preparation and preparation required time. The Japanese hesitated and **Britain** was able to consolidate her position in western **Europe** before she was challenged in the **Far East** and the **Pacific**.

Her policy ² was clearly stated on 13 July. ‘The immediate threat is to the **United Kingdom**, the security of which is vital. At present our policy must be a short-term one with the primary object of avoiding defeat at Home, and all resources must be devoted initially to this purpose. It is hoped that by September this phase will be over and that any attempt at invasion will have been defeated. The attention of the enemy is then likely to turn to the **Middle East**: this may happen simultaneously with the attack on this country, but owing to climatic conditions it is doubtful if the enemy will embark on large-scale operations from **Libya** or North Africa ... until the end of September. Therefore, as soon as the situation at Home permits, it will be necessary to reinforce the **Middle East**, and it is hoped that it will be possible to reconstitute the 6th Australian Division and the 2nd New Zealand Division in the **Middle East** by the autumn or early winter of this year.’

This meant that the Division would assemble in the **Middle East** and not in **Britain**; that the **Second Echelon** would not be released before September. On the other hand, the **Third Echelon** could travel with the convoy due to leave **Sydney** on or about 23 August. In fact the transports were now assembling and space for the New Zealand troops had already been allocated. The New Zealand Government, however, was not convinced that the **Third Echelon**

¹ Foreign Secretary Matsuoka to **Adolf Hitler**, in Churchill, Vol. III, p. 166.

² Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to High Commissioner for the **United Kingdom** (**Wellington**), 13 Jul 1940.

with its reinforcements and auxiliary troops should leave the **Pacific** zone. It asked for more information about the dangers of the route and the availability of equipment, and pointed out that if a brigade group went to **Fiji** the number of reinforcements travelling with the echelon would have to be reduced in proportion. To these questions the

Government received carefully worded but reasonable answers—and the hope that they would send the forces as proposed.

After carefully weighing all the known factors the Government decided to send the troops to the **Middle East. On 3 August in a cable to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs it retraced the steps by which it had reached this decision and elaborated the policy from which it was never to deviate at any future stage of the war.**

The Government realised that the situation in the **Far East had been deteriorating and that war with **Japan** had to be accepted as a probability. With the long and complicated coastline of the Dominion offering scores of landing places to any invader, there was every reason to defer the departure of the echelon. It was the only body of trained troops in the Dominion; if it left it would take with it arms and equipment from supplies that were already inadequate.**

On the other hand, the collapse of **France had doubled the possible weight of attack in the **Middle East**. It was therefore essential to build up the forces already in that area, even if the half-equipped troops might have to fight on unequal terms. The proposed escort for the convoy was lighter than it had been for the earlier echelons but the Government realised that, if the departure of the convoy was postponed until a stronger escort could be provided, the **First Echelon** would be left unsupported and the concentration of the Division would be delayed. The Chiefs of Staff, in their turn, had emphasised the vital necessity of safeguarding the sources of oil and of maintaining the lines of communication through the **Middle East**. They thought that the best contribution the Dominion could make to the common cause would be to despatch the Third Echelon to the **Middle East**.**

For these reasons, the Government ‘fully accepted the fact that a large view must be taken, that in the last resort this Dominion must stand or fall according to the decision in the main theatres of war, and that as a corollary it would be wise to have all possible forces at decisive points rather than to disperse them in reserves all over the world.’ The

Third Echelon would go to the **Middle East**, but in view of the threatening attitude of **Japan** the Dominion would retain such troops as were necessary for the defence of **Fiji**. The 3050 reinforcements who were to have travelled with the **Third Echelon** were consequently retained in New Zealand and organised for service in **Fiji**.

To this decision there was, on 9 August, a characteristic response from Churchill: 'I read the Governor-General's telegram ... with the greatest interest and sympathy. I appreciate fully the great responsibility which you and your colleagues cannot but feel in taking the decisions which you have reached as to the disposition of the available New Zealand forces. For our part we are greatly heartened as ever by New Zealand's readiness to meet the needs of the situation both in the **Middle East** and the **Pacific**. I feel sure of the absolute soundness of your decision.'¹

Having made this decision, the Government arranged for the concentration of **2 NZEF** in the **Middle East**. The **Third Echelon** would sail in the August convoy; Brigadier Barrowclough² and his staff would leave **Britain** and prepare for its arrival; **General Freyberg** and the **Second Echelon** would remain until after the **Battle of Britain**.

The **Middle East** to which they were going had been the scene of much activity since the arrival of the **First Echelon** in February 1940. In case **Italy** came into the war, the **Western Desert Force** had screened the **Libyan** frontier and maintained a series of carefully chosen but inadequately manned positions along the desert road. Fourth Brigade Group, as part of the reserve force, had remained in **Egypt** but in May, when the front in **France** was disintegrating and **Mussolini** was waiting for the psychological moment, it was given a more definite role in the defence system. Eighteenth Battalion was rushed into the **Kasr-el-Nil** Barracks, leaving 19 and 20 Battalions to deal with fifth-column activities in **Cairo**. Later in the month the brigade had become responsible for the security of **Cairo**, with **General Freyberg** in command of all operations in the city and its suburbs. The battalions in turn did

spells of duty at the barracks; the machine-gunners had detachments at the Citadel and about the airfields at **Heliopolis** and **Helwan**; the rest of the brigade group was at **Maadi** on short notice to move. The plan was afterwards amended by the provision of a motorised reserve and anti-parachute detachments at Bulac bridge and **Gezira Sporting Club**.

The really serious problems of the period were the detachment of units and the gradual dispersion of the brigade. Faced with a dangerous shortage of guns and transport, of signallers and railway operators, General Headquarters Middle East had asked **General Freyberg** if he could provide troops for the operation of railways

¹ *Documents*, Vol. I, p. 175.

² See p. 37, note 2.

and communications. General Wavell appreciated his desire to have the New Zealand Division working as a complete formation, but stressed the fact that adequate communications were absolutely essential. With some misgivings **Freyberg** authorised the detachment of signallers, **Army Service Corps** units and, in the event of a crisis, officers and men to operate the **Egyptian State Railways**. The whole arrangement was to be of a very temporary nature.

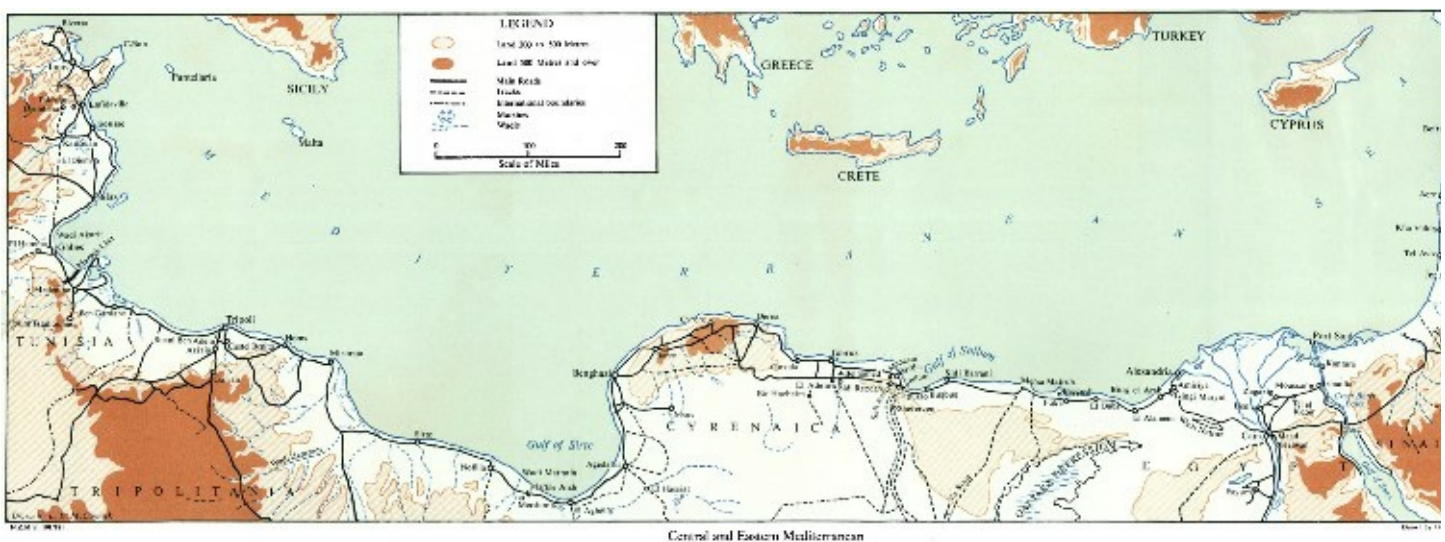
The first to leave were 7 officers and 122 other ranks who, on 9 June, became Advanced Corps Signals, **Western Desert Force**. They operated from **Baggush** under the command of Major **Agar**,¹ providing despatch riders and controlling all line and wireless communication between Headquarters British Troops in Egypt and the formations in the desert.

Two days later **Italy** entered the war. Officially it was at 0001 hours on 11 June; in **Maadi Camp** the news spread on the evening of 10 June. At the cinema, at the **NAAFI** and at the **Maadi Recreation Tent** the announcement was received with prolonged cheering. A blackout was

ordered throughout the camp, anti-aircraft posts were manned, slit trenches were dug in case of air raids. To prevent sabotage and to meet airborne attacks, small detachments went out to guard the ammunition dump ² in the **Tura** caves, the **Maadi** water supply and the grounds of the Gezira Sporting Club, the most suitable landing area for paratroops in **Cairo**. In **Alexandria** New Zealanders on leave from the **Sidi Bishr** rest camp joined the street patrols of the **Coldstream Guards** but there was little trouble. The Fascist leaders of the Italian colony had been arrested and life in the cities went on as before.

In the **Western Desert** the Italians were no more aggressive than they had been in **Cairo**, so it was soon evident that they would not attack until the cooler weather of the late autumn or early winter. **General Freyberg** was therefore free to join ³ the Second Echelon in **Britain**, leaving Brigadier Puttick in command of 2 NZEF (**Middle East**) and **Lieutenant-Colonel Inglis** as the commander of the brigade.

The understanding was that the force would not take part in any active operations until the arrival of the Second and Third Echelons. But the General had agreed to the employment of the battalions in the rear areas and of the transport units in the desert.



Central and Eastern Mediterranean

¹ **Lt-Col G. L. Agar**, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 18 Jun 1905; telegraph engineer; OC Corps Sigs, WDF, Oct 1940–Feb 1941; DCSO **Anzac Corps** Apr–May 1941; CO 2 NZ Div Sigs Sep 1941–Sep 1942, Nov 1942–Jun 1943; OC NZ Corps of Sigs Sep 1941–Jun 1943; SSO Sigs, Army HQ, Sep 1943–Dec 1944.

² On 13–29 June a platoon of B Company 18 Battalion went from **Cairo** to **Khartoum** as the guard with some ammunition stores.

³ **General Freyberg** left by air on 17 June; see pp. 33– 4 for an account of his journey.

This explains why on 18 June, after only twenty-four hours' notice, 18 and 19 Battalions with an Advanced Headquarters from 4 Brigade were transported by 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company to **Garawla**, a rock-strewn waste near **Mersa Matruh**. Here they were 200 miles west of **Alexandria** in an area of some strategic importance and under the command of **Western Desert Force**.

The battalions then continued their training or improved the local defences. A new landing ground was required at **Baggush**, patrols had to watch the beaches at night, guards were wanted for the Italian prisoners at **Mersa Matruh**. The Wadi Naghhamish, which stretched inland for several miles, was to be converted into a tremendous anti-tank ditch. With little mechanical equipment ¹ this was a laborious task, remembered by all who were there for the intense heat, the plague of flies and the moonlight nights when Italian aircraft droned overhead searching for targets on the railway and at **Mersa Matruh**. The tours of duty, however, were not long. The battalions were replaced on 5 July by 20 Battalion and a composite unit of artillerymen and signallers, who in their turn were relieved on 29 July by 18 Battalion and another composite force.

Fourth RMT Company remained in the desert at Smugglers' Cove, attached to **Western Desert Force** and close to **Mersa Matruh**, an Egyptian watering place with white houses and a mosque, palm trees and a perfect beach. As the terminus of the desert railway, **Matruh** was the base from which the company took supplies along the coast road to the forward depots in the **Sidi Barrani** area. On occasions there were variations in the routine: from July to October C Section was at **Sidi Barrani** attached to **7 Armoured Division**; in November B Section was there directly under orders from Western Desert Force; and from 14 August to 4 September A Section, more fortunate than the others, had a leave period in **Maadi**, its work being done by a detachment from the Divisional Supply Column.

This work along the coast road and inland to the desert outposts was most exacting. The drivers were enduring their first Egyptian summer, the hours were long and roads dangerous because of air raids by day and blackouts at night, but there were no serious injuries until 12 July when Corporal **Pussell**² was wounded during an air raid. This was the first battle casualty in the Division.

¹ Telegram, Puttick to Prime Minister, 2 Aug 1940: 'In conversation with General Wilson I suggested New Zealand might be willing to provide power machinery and after consultation with General Wavell he asked me to cable you.' See *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 228–31, for correspondence leading to the formation of 21 Mechanical Equipment Company.

² **Cpl O. T. Pussell**, m.i.d.; born Feilding, 12 Feb 1917; battery assembler; twice wounded; died of wounds 25 Dec 1940.

For those who remained in the **Maadi- Cairo** area there was the more prosaic life of pickets and training exercises. The Egyptian summer was an unending succession of blistering days, each so like the others that odd incidents of the period stand out in the war diaries like islands in an ocean of dull detail. The engineers constructed 200 dummy tanks¹ and

motor vehicles that were urgently required at **Mersa Matruh**. The **Divisional Cavalry**, the anti-tank battery and the machine-gunners provided officers and men for the **Long Range Desert Patrol**. Nos. 1 and 2 Patrols were complete by the end of July, the cavalry war diary recording their detachment from the Division and stating that 'What is known of their destination and the scope of their mission may not as yet be committed to paper.' Parties of selected officers and other ranks who had been attached to **Western Desert Force** for operational experience took part in patrol work which was now being carried on energetically behind the Italian lines. On returning to their units they were able to pass on accounts of their experiences, to the benefit of both training and morale.

At the same time this practice of detaching units for service with other formations could easily have been abused, especially when Wavell on 3 July suggested that the units in the **Middle East** be regrouped. As part of an Egypt Corps, 16 Australian Brigade and 4 New Zealand Brigade would form a '6th Australian Division'; the **Divisional Signals** and 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion would be Corps troops; and the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment would come under the command of 4 Indian Division. As this would have wrecked the organisation of the New Zealand Division, Brigadier Puttick cabled to **General Freyberg**, who promptly explained to General Wavell the rights and responsibilities of a Dominion commander: ²

Have just received your proposals for reorganisation with its repercussions upon the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in Egypt. As no such change can be made without the approval of the **New Zealand Government**, I hope these proposals will not be proceeded with. I do not wish to disclose to the **New Zealand Government** the proposals as outlined by you to break up the New Zealand Force, as they would make a most unfavourable impression in New Zealand official circles with repercussions you probably have not foreseen. The answer to any such proposals would, I am sure, be an uncompromising refusal. ³

¹ R. J. Collins, *Lord Wavell*, p. 268: 'By means of dummy tanks ... it was made as difficult as possible for the whereabouts and, what was more, the somewhat diminished strength of the **7th Armoured Division**'s two brigades, to be ascertained.' Telegram, Puttick to **Freyberg**, 8 July: 'at the best they might prove very important. At the worst they provide excellent shade.'

² In August General Blamey had to state the case for **Australia** when Wavell proposed to take two brigades from **6 Australian Division**.

³ *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 187–8.

This decided the question; **Egypt Corps** was organised but the **Australian** and **New Zealand** groups were included as self-contained formations.

There had, of course, been some very good reasons for the suggested reorganisation. In July 1940 the situation in the **Middle East** was no more encouraging than it was in **Western Europe**. The **French** commanders in **Syria** and **Somaliland** were obedient to the **Vichy Government**; the **Italians** in **East Africa**, having forced the evacuation of eastern **Sudan** and **British Somaliland**, were threatening **Kenya Colony**; in **Libya** the **Italian Army** had already made reconnaissances towards **Sollum**. To meet these threats Wavell had to use every available unit and, above all, had to gain time until men, tanks, aircraft and equipment arrived from **Britain** by way of the **Cape of Good Hope**.

If the **Italians** entered **Egypt** he proposed to retire to his defences about **Mersa Matruh**. Being short of both troops and mechanical transport, he had to employ the small **New Zealand** group, even though it was incomplete and partially equipped. In the event of an **Italian** attack, **4 Brigade Group** would take over from **11 Indian Infantry Brigade** the protection of the lines of communication between **Alexandria** and **Mersa Matruh**. The warning order about a probable move was received on

19 August, a week before the date of departure.

The guards at the Tura caves, the detachments picketing the Cairo Sub-area and the battalions digging the anti-tank ditch at Garawla were recalled and, as far as was possible, equipped for active service. That completed, the New Zealand Division as it then existed— Divisional Headquarters, 4 Infantry Brigade and the supporting units—would move to the heat and the sand of Baggush, a coastal oasis with some palm trees and a beach. The Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General for the Division, Colonel W. G. Stevens, would remain with his staff in Maadi Camp to control the base units necessary for the maintenance of the Division and the reception of the Third Echelon.

The move began on 27 August and the units, after much shuffling and reshuffling, were dug in and camouflaged by the end of September. Headquarters New Zealand Division, with 5 Field Park Company and 4 Field Ambulance, was at Burbeita; Headquarters 4 Brigade was at El Daba. Along the line of communication were 18 and 19 Battalions, 4 Field Regiment and 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion in No. 3 sector at Baggush, the Divisional Cavalry Regiment in No. 2 sector at El Daba and 20 Battalion in No. 1 sector at Ikingi Maryut. At the end of September 20 Battalion moved to Baggush and the sector was taken over by 16 Australian Brigade.

The work to be done in the Baggush Box was explained to the senior officers by Lieutenant-General R. N. O'Connor, commander of the Western Desert Force. There was to be an elaborate defence system under the control of 4 Indian Division, which would take care of the western and southern approaches while 4 Brigade Group, with 4/6 Rajputana Rifles under command, would prepare the eastern sector. The Mediterranean would be the northern flank of the Box. Within it trenches and living quarters, pillboxes and gunpits had to be constructed; unfortunately, the New Zealand engineers who could have simplified the work were required elsewhere. Fifth Field Park Company had to maintain the workshop and control the water supply within the Box. Sixth Field Company, when it returned from some defence work

west of **Alexandria**, was needed for the construction of a pipeline from **Baggush** to **Mersa Matruh**. This demanded its attention until December, when it handed over the pipeline to 126 E and M Company, **Royal Engineers**, and went to **Gebel Maryam** in the Canal Zone for a course in floating bridge training. The units of 4 Brigade, with few compressors or power tools, had therefore to construct the eastern sector as best they could. And this, with intervals for training, they continued to do until they were recalled to **Helwan Camp** in January 1941.

The units which had been attached to the **Western Desert Force** in the anxious days of June were not released to join the group in the **Baggush Box**. The signallers were actually in the same area, but they could not be replaced as they were operating the signals for Force Headquarters and repairing the cable system when it was damaged during the air raids on **Mersa Matruh**. As there was a shortage of qualified linesmen in the **Middle East**, the New Zealand detachment often worked for long and dangerous periods re-establishing these communications.

The trucks of 4 RMT Company were usually far to the west of **Baggush**. Convoys did on occasion go south to **Siwa** oasis and in October the company, assisted by the Petrol Company, moved an Indian battalion from **Baggush** to near **Garawla**. But, for the most part, the unit had become too important a link in the desert supply system for it to be withdrawn to the Box. Supplies were now coming out steadily to the western railhead so two sections were working from the depot near **Fuka**, with another, usually C Section, in the forward area with **7 Armoured Division**.

The Italian answer to this increased volume of transport was more air activity. There were showers of shaving sticks and pencils, tooth-paste, innocent lumps of wood and thermos-flask bombs which became active after touching the ground. They were the novelty of the period; in fact a thermos bomb provided the Division's first 'killed in action' casualty. On 13 September, when a convoy from 4 RMT Company was

moving past Kilo 91, it ran into a sprinkling of thermos bombs and Driver **Osborn**¹ was killed from the resultant explosions, as were several British drivers.

With 4 RMT Company so occupied in the **Western Desert**, the Petrol Company and the Supply Column were brought out in September from **Maadi** to **El Daba**. They built up a DID (Detail Issue Depot) at Abu Haggag or carried supplies to the Box and, on occasions, to **Siwa** oasis.

This historic resort, being of some strategic importance, was now a military outpost to which supplies were taken from **Mersa Matruh**. The battalions at **Baggush** supplied small anti-aircraft detachments to protect the convoys against the occasional air attacks, and the only New Zealand casualties for November occurred when the oasis was bombed and three men from 18 Battalion were wounded.

Along the line of communication between **Mersa Matruh** and **Cairo** there were equally urgent transport problems. If the troops in the desert were to be maintained and if supplies for the First Libyan Campaign were to be accumulated, the Egyptian State Railway line had to be operated more efficiently. And the line had to be extended westwards from **Mersa Matruh** as quickly as possible. The 80-mile stretch between **Daba** and **Matruh** was particularly important, but the Egyptian authorities would not hand it over to a British staff. They were quite satisfied with a daily service of three or four trains, often hours or even days late. But if any counter-offensive was to be organised there had to be, in spite of the blackout, the bomb damage and the drifts of wind-blown sand, a regular service each day of ten or more trains.

To bring about such a change the non-divisional troops from New Zealand were available. The first to arrive were 9 Survey Company and 10 Railway Construction Company, who had sailed with the **Second Echelon** and had been diverted to **Britain**. They had left there in August and arrived in Egypt² on 16 September when the movement authorities were facing a minor crisis. The Egyptian railway staff on the **El Daba-Mersa Matruh** section had been so disturbed by Italian bombers that they

were proposing to cease work. Consequently the first task for the New Zealand railwaymen in the **Middle East** was to send a small detachment to **Daba**, where British engineers were hurriedly preparing to take over the

¹ **Dvr G. R. Osborn**; born **London**, 27 Jan 1907; truck driver; killed in action 13 Sep 1940.

² See pp. 34– 5.

railway system. And there the detachment remained until the Egyptians could be persuaded to carry on.

Meanwhile the companies had left for the **Western Desert** on 29 September, only a fortnight after their arrival in the Middle East. Ninth Survey Company had to select and survey two routes, one from Kilo 243 towards **Minqar Qaim** and the other an extension of the main line. Until this work was complete and the necessary equipment could be found, 10 Construction Company was employed with 4 Brigade Group in the **Baggush Box**, its men enduring the seasonal sandstorms and suffering from attacks of dysentery.

These two surveys were not the only tasks for the Survey Company. As they were, until the arrival of Australian and South African companies, the only survey experts in the **Middle East**, their services were very much in demand. War material was accumulating with the arrival of every convoy; supply depots had to be surveyed and hundreds of miles of railway line had to be selected, surveyed and mapped. Before long there were survey parties throughout the **Middle East**, often 2000 miles apart and very often in different countries. By 1945 9 Survey Company had surveyed many of the railways, sidings and depots used by the army in North Africa; its detachments had worked in **Palestine** and **Transjordan**, **Syria** and **Turkey**, **Iraq** and **Iran**, **Sudan** and **Eritrea**. The first of these detachments spent October and November in the **Sudan** surveying bridge sites across the Atbara River; another was recalled to

survey depots in **Palestine**; and another came back to work in the Canal Zone.

In **Maadi Camp**, on the other hand, there was none of this dispersion and disintegration. The autumn of 1940 was notable for the organisation of a permanent base and the simplification of the administration of **2 NZEF**. On 1 October HQ **2 NZEF**, with Colonel Stevens as Officer in Charge of Administration, came into being to control all reinforcements, the base depots ¹ and the administration of **2 NZEF** as a whole. The force in the field, which was the concern of Headquarters New Zealand Division, would, when recalled, concentrate at **Helwan**, leaving **Maadi** for the Base Camp and the training depots.

The first troops to enter this newly organised base were the units of the **Third Echelon**. Their convoy had left New Zealand on 27 August, the *Orcades* ² from **Lyttelton**, the *Mauretania* ³ and the

¹ Reinforcement, Reception and Discharge Depots to replace the General Base Depot formed in New Zealand; a Composite ASC Company; Base Signals and Provost Companies; Base Kit Store; Base Hygiene Section; Port Detachment at **Suez**; Base Ordnance Depot.

² Carrying **26 Bn**, **6 Fd Amb**, C Sec Div Amn Coy—1465 all ranks.

³ **25 Bn**, **6 Fd Regt**, 33 Bty 7 A-Tk Regt, **2 Gen Hosp**, Mobile Dental Section—2334 all ranks.

Empress of Japan ¹ from **Wellington**. They had met next morning in Cook Strait and set off for **Fremantle**, escorted by HMS *Achilles* and HMAS *Perth*. On 31 August they were joined by the *Aquitania* and HMAS *Canberra* from **Sydney**. After calling at **Fremantle**, the convoy reached **Bombay** on 15 September and broke into different groups destined either for **Britain** or the **Middle East**.

As the *Orcades* was going on to **Britain**, 14 and 15 Forestry Companies went aboard from the *Empress of Japan* while 26 Battalion left for the humid atmosphere of the racecourse and eventually for the crowded decks of the *Orion*. As there was no accommodation for 6 Field Ambulance and some 500 reinforcements they were sent to the stadium. When flooded out from there by the monsoon rains, they were quartered at the racecourse and finally at **Deolali**, a rest camp 100 miles from **Bombay**.

This small detachment remained in **India** until 9 October when it left **Bombay** for a grimy but exciting voyage in the French motor-vessel *Felix Roussel*. In the **Red Sea** the convoy was bombed by aircraft from **Eritrea** and, when east of Massawa, had to face units of the Italian Navy. The *Kimberley*, one of the escort vessels, put an Italian destroyer out of action, engaged the shore batteries and ended the day as a disabled vessel towed astern of the convoy. In Port **Sudan**, where the *Felix Roussel* had put in for water, there was another air attack with a near miss on the wharf-side. Finally, unlike most reinforcements, they passed **Port Tewfik** and steamed up the **Suez Canal** to disembark at **Port Said**.

The main body of the echelon had a less exciting voyage from **Bombay**. The troops in the *Mauretania* went to the *Ormonde*, a ship that had just arrived from **Britain**. She had been left in a filthy condition by another contingent, the living quarters were crowded and the meat which was being taken aboard was already tainted from exposure on the wharves. Consequently, when the large convoy was due to sail on 19 September some of the troops got out of control and the *Ormonde* had to be retained in port. Many excuses can be made for the men; their officers could be criticised for not explaining the urgency of the convoy system. Nevertheless the incident was regrettable. In the end, after order was restored, arrangements were made for some of the men to sleep on deck and the *Ormonde* was able to catch up with the waiting convoy on the afternoon of the 20th. Nine days later the ships were in **Port Tewfik**.

Within a few days Headquarters **2 NZEF** had decided the future of the

different units. Sixth Anti-Tank Company was disbanded and

¹ 24 Bn, 19 A Tps Coy, HQ Ry Op Gp, 16 Ry Op Coy, 17 Ry Op Coy, 13 Ry Constr Coy, 14 and 15 Forestry Coys—2635 all ranks. Total for the convoy, with reinforcements, 6434 all ranks.

its personnel transferred to the Reinforcement Depot; C Section Ammunition Company joined the rest of the unit at **Abbassia**. Sixth Brigade, 6 Field Regiment, 33 Battery of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment and the 600 reinforcements in the depot began a course of individual training, stiffened with long marches and leading up to the higher realms of tactical exercises in the desert. Nineteenth Army Troops Company endured some weeks of elementary training before leaving for the Canal Zone and an intensive course in field engineering. This was not its normal role but it was necessary if the company was to be the substitute ¹ for 8 Field Company.

The non-divisional units were absorbed without any waste of time. On 8 October 2 General Hospital, with Colonel F. M. Spencer as CO and Miss D. I. Brown as matron, took over the hospital at **Helwan**, relieving the members of 4 Field Ambulance who had established it in July and the advance party from 1 General Hospital which had been attached ever since its arrival from **Britain** in September. The other members of 1 General Hospital who arrived in November established their unit at **Helmieh**, a dusty suburb of **Cairo** and the camp site of 1 NZEF in 1915. The hospital was opened on 15 December with Colonel A. C. McKillop in charge and Miss E. C. Mackay ² as matron.

The railway companies were required so urgently that the Director of Transportation, **Middle East**, wanted them in the desert ten days after their arrival. One hundred operators and plate-layers were away within a fortnight; the others were needed but they had first to complete an intensive weapon-training course. All the same, they were out in the **Western Desert** only a few months after they had entered camp in **Ngaruawahia**. On 21 October 16 Railway Operating Company went out to

El Daba to assist the Egyptian staff on the line from there to **Mersa Matruh**; 13 Construction Company went to **Qasaba** and became responsible for the maintenance of the track; 17 Operating Company went on 7–8 November to control the yards and railway station at **Burg el Arab**.

Their immediate task was to eliminate the delays in the movement of wagons and to increase the daily number of trains without completely taking over from the Egyptians. ‘The Company had to make 10 trains run where a couple ambled along in a maleesh fashion before.’ The Director of Transportation had been very careful to explain the delicacy of the situation and the necessity of avoiding any friction whatsoever. The solution was to have men at each station along the line and spare engine crews at danger points or regular target areas. The engines were run without headlights and

¹ See p. 45, note 3.

² Matron-in-Chief Miss E. C. Mackay, OBE, RRC, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Porangahau**, 13 Feb 1902; Sister; Matron, Gen Hosp 1940–43; Principal Matron Nov 1943–May 1945.

the water, which had to be brought out from the **Nile**, was issued most carefully. In time the trains whose arrival had once been unpredictable were so regular that officials with short memories were known to pay the indirect compliment of complaining when there were any delays.

But there was another side to this swift absorption of the Third Echelon. It was very evident that GHQ Middle East was making no effort to assemble the scattered units of the Division. Divisional Headquarters and 6 Brigade Group were at **Maadi**, but most of the other detachments were over 200 miles away. **Divisional Signals** and 4 RMT Company were with **Western Desert Force**; B and C Sections of the Ammunition Company were with the **Cairo Area**; the men with the **Long Range Desert**

Patrol were on the Libyan frontier under British officers; the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment was under Headquarters Lines of Communication; 4 Brigade Group, 27 (MG) Battalion, 5 Field Park Company and 6 Field Company were controlled by **Western Desert Force**; and about fifty artificers were scattered from **Khartoum** to **Alexandria**.

In September, soon after his arrival from **Britain**, **General Freyberg** had asked for the return of all these units as he now could, with Headquarters and two infantry brigades, begin training on a divisional scale. The answer from GHQ, **Cairo**, had been that they could not be released; General Wilson had suggested that they would not be available until 1941; and Headquarters British Troops in Egypt had stated in writing that it was 'out of the question for the time being.'

These unsympathetic replies forced **Freyberg** to explain to the **Middle East Command** the status of **2 NZEF**. In a letter on 19 October he said:

The New Zealand Forces are not an integral part of the British Army—they are a distinct New Zealand force, proud of their own identity. They cannot be split up and used piecemeal, except with the consent of the New Zealand Government. The past I know has been unfortunate, and for that I must take my share of the blame. We came over here in February, keen and willing to help everybody, and have never refused a request of any sort. It has been a mistake, and the efficiency of the Division has suffered grievously. Now, because we are insisting on concentrating as a force, we are most unpopular. I feel I let our force in for this by not saying 'No' right at the beginning, as I believe did the AIF.

For your information I send you a copy of the special powers ¹ vested in me by the **New Zealand Government**. They will put you in the picture. They were granted to me when I accepted command of the NZEF....

¹ See pp. 19–20. A few weeks earlier the Australian charter was produced when Wilson, Wavell, and finally Churchill ordered the movement of a brigade without the authority of Blamey and

contrary to the information he had given his Government. See Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 109.

The position is quite clear; in an emergency we will all work under anybody's command, and do any job for which we are trained and equipped. The Division meanwhile cannot be used piecemeal. ¹

This cleared the air and the future concentration of **2 NZEF** was soon settled with General Wavell. He was planning the counterattack which opened the First Libyan Campaign, so **4 Brigade Group**, as a reserve in the **Baggush Box**, would have to remain in the desert until it could be relieved by an Australian division. ² But the other detached units ³ were to come under the command of Headquarters **4 Brigade** in order to maintain some connection between them and the Division. With the **Long Range Desert Patrol**, however, the only concession that could be granted was the right to provide substitutes for those already in the desert.

This still meant that the New Zealand forces in the **Middle East** would not be assembled for divisional training until January 1941. If the necessary equipment was then available the Division would be enlarged and reorganised on the lines of the Bartholomew Report. ⁴ There would be a reconnaissance unit, increased mobility and much greater fire power. The Division would not, however, be mobile enough either in attack or in defence, so **General Freyberg** thought that there should be an armoured brigade. ⁵ 'With such a brigade the Division would be a most formidable fighting formation, well fitted to undertake any operation in the **Western Desert** with undoubted reduction in casualties.' The authorities agreed in principle but pointed out that the plans were dependent upon the volume of equipment arriving in the **Middle East**. At the moment the Division was receiving its share of the supplies which Churchill was so boldly despatching to the **Middle East**. The infantry were fully equipped and **4 Field Regiment** had new 25-pounder guns.

The greatest problem was that of reinforcements. The decision to

garrison Fiji had meant that instead of 2900 men only 600 reinforcements had come over with the Third Echelon. To allow for casualties when the Division went into action, the Government decided that the trained troops in Fiji should be replaced by recruits from New Zealand and sent as soon as possible to the Middle East. They would be needed in the spring of 1941, when the Division as part of GHQ Reserve might be moved at short notice to any part of the Middle East.

¹ *Documents*, Vol. I, p. 190.

² See pp. 72– 3 for Wavell's explanation.

³ In October 6 Field Company, 5 Field Park Company and the Divisional Cavalry Regiment all became part of 4 Brigade Group.

⁴ This was prepared after the fighting in France in 1940 by a committee under the chairmanship of General Sir William Bartholomew.

⁵ It was not until November 1943 that 2 NZ Division went into action with its own tanks of 4 Armoured Brigade.

This, however, was still in the realms of possibility. The problems of the moment were those of the units at Maadi and Baggush. In the former camp 6 Brigade and the men in the different reinforcement depots were training in comparative comfort. With the scattered units in the desert it was very different. They were doing urgent work as well as regular training. The great anti-tank ditch was still being excavated, for the most part by 10 Railway Construction Company, with hundreds of native labourers and a party from 19 Army Troops Company to operate the compressors, power shovels and bulldozers that had arrived with the Third Echelon. Signallers, engineers and ASC drivers were still with the British units; the battalions of 4 Brigade, released from the anti-tank ditch, were now training according to the latest theories of desert

warfare.

This life in the desert was monotonous and often Spartan in its simplicity. The hot, clear days and sharp, brilliant nights followed in endless succession. Meals seemed to consist of tinned food and chlorinated tea. Self-control was needed when the water allowance was one and a half gallons per man per day and resignation when sandstorms paralysed all movements. Milder days did come with the approach of winter but they meant colder nights and heavy showers, such as those of 26–27 November when water rushed down the wadis, flooding dugouts and anti tank ditches. As compensation there were fewer flies and less dysentery, football matches and leave to [Alexandria](#). But there was one obvious and unpleasant fact—the brigade group would remain in the desert until the Italian Army was no longer a threat to Egypt.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 4 – THE FIRST LIBYAN CAMPAIGN, 1940-41

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The First Libyan Campaign, 1940-41

IN December, three months after they had crossed the Egyptian frontier, the Italians were still only a few miles past **Sidi Barrani** with a line of fortified camps that ran south-west across the desert from **Maktila**, near the coast, to the outposts at **Tummar West**, **Tummar East** and **Point 90**, thence to **Nibeiwa** and eventually to **Sofafi** on the southern escarpment. Behind this screen they were busily bringing forward the motor road and the pipeline from **Bardia**.

The British were also building up their defences and planning a big attack. General Wavell proposed to exploit a gap between **Nibeiwa** and **Sofafi** where the defences were not mutually self-supporting, and through which it was possible to strike north towards the sea. The **Tummar** positions could then be attacked from the rear; it was even possible that an armoured force might be able to cut the coast road and so isolate the Italian force in **Sidi Barrani**. Success depended upon surprise, and surprise depended upon the attacking force being able to move unobserved across some 70 miles of desert. This was a gamble but the dazzling prize was well worth the risk.

In the plan there was no task for 4 New Zealand Brigade Group. Wavell had hoped to use it during the initial stages of the attack, but the **New Zealand Government** wanted the troops to go into action as a complete division under their own commander. If he had pressed for it permission would doubtless have been granted, but the request would have gone through too many channels and required so much explanation that his plans for the strictest secrecy could have been jeopardised. He preferred to use 4 Indian Division in the gap, a British brigade for the attack upon **Sidi Barrani**, and the Australian divisions when he was bustling the Italians out of **Cyrenaica**.

In view of this decision it is surprising how many New Zealand units or detachments from units took part in the campaign. The signallers

who had been with **Western Desert Force** headquarters since June had handed over their Advanced Corps Signals to the **Royal Corps of Signals** in November, but the majority of them were still there doing much the same work; in fact Lieutenant-Colonel Agar was now commanding Corps Signals, **Western Desert Force**, with No. 1 Company (Lines) commanded by Major A. E. **Smith** ¹ and No. 2 Company (Signals Office and Wireless) commanded by Captain **Feeney**. ² The signals traffic had been increasing with the arrival of stores and the preparations for the counter-attack. Lines had to be adjusted, underground cables installed and miles of field cable laid along the secondary routes. This meant that when the attack opened the signalmen were working three shifts every twenty-four hours in order to control the communication system for the whole force.

Equally essential to the success of the campaign were the companies of railwaymen. The 80 miles of permanent way between **El Daba** and **Mersa Matruh** were still the responsibility of 13 Railway Construction Company and 16 Railway Operating Company; at **Burg el Arab** 17 Railway Operating Company still controlled the yards and railway station. The necessary number of trains was getting through to the forward railheads from which supplies were taken to the desert depots. No exact date could be given to the men, but a few days before the attack opened all station detachments were warned that the smooth running of the service was now so imperative that it had to be maintained, Egyptians or no Egyptians.

The engineers were also needed to deal with the water problems of the desert army. In October 6 Field Company had been brought out from **Alexandria** to **Garawla** to construct underground reservoirs, pumping stations and some 18 miles of pipeline through Mersa **Matruh** to **Charing Cross**. The campaign opened just as the last work was being done at the different water points. Fifth Field Park Company, which had gone to **Burbeita** as part of 4 Brigade Group, was now employed taking machinery to **Charing Cross**, operating the water pumps and supervising pipelines and reservoirs.

Then, in the last week before the attack was launched, the acute

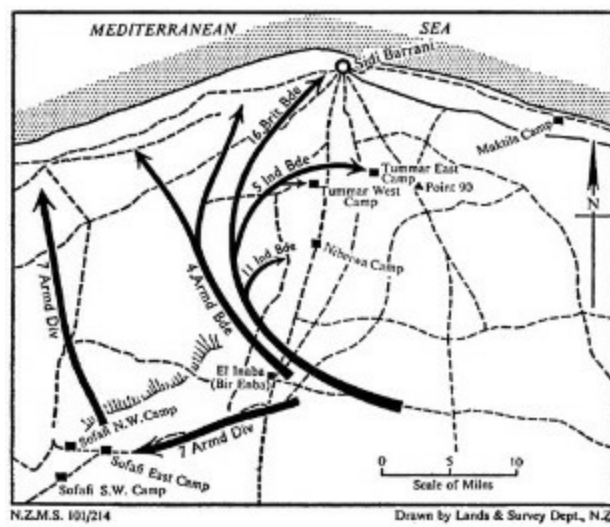
shortage of vehicles and drivers brought all the New Zealand transport units into the forward areas. Fourth RMT Company had been there for months but the others had been with 4 Brigade Group at **Baggush**. On 4–5 December, however, the Petrol and Supply Companies and A Section of the Ammunition Company were sent up to **Qasaba** and detailed to transfer stores from the railway siding to the depots which were being built up along the desert tracks.

Fourth RMT Company was given a more exciting task: the transportation of 5 Indian Brigade, which as part of 4 Indian Division was to strike through the Bir Enba gap. B Section was recalled from

¹ **Maj A. E. Smith**, MBE, ED; **Auckland**; born England, 6 Mar 1903; cable-jointer foreman; Div Sigs 1939–42; OC 1 Coy Corps Sigs, WDF, 1940–41.

² **Capt J. Feeney**; born **Scotland**, 17 Jul 1905; civil servant; wounded 29 Nov 1941; died at sea 5 Dec 1941.

7 Armoured Division and at Smugglers' Cove the company, in the obscurity of a sandstorm, overhauled or replaced the vehicles which it had been using for the last five months. In the evening of 5 December, under the command of Major **Whyte**, ¹ it joined the Indians at **Garawla**. A Section (Captain **Muller** ²) went to 1 Royal Fusiliers, B Section (Captain **Good** ³) to 4/6 **Rajputana Rifles**, and C Section (Captain **McAlpine** ⁴) to 3/1 Punjab Regiment.



THE OPENING ATTACKS OF THE FIRST LIBYAN CAMPAIGN, 9-11 DECEMBER 1940

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Next morning 4 Indian Division drove off along the **Siwa** track, ostensibly for another full-scale exercise. In a cold wind and shrouded with thick dust, the widely dispersed vehicles bumped some 50 miles across the desert and halted well to the south of **Mersa Matruh**. Next day while they waited, every gun and every vehicle camouflaged, orders were issued for the attack.

¹ **Lt-Col G. H. Whyte**, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Te Puke**; born Pahiatua, 23 Aug 1895; company representative; 3 Auck, 4 Bde, and ASC, 1 Bde, 1917-19; OC 4 RMT Coy Nov 1939-Jan 1941; CRASC 5 Div (in NZ) Dec 1942-May 1943; CO Trg Bn, **Trentham**, Nov 1943-Oct 1944.

² **Capt F. H. Muller**, MC; **Hamilton**; born NZ 18 Mar 1905; engine driver; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.

³ **Maj G. G. Good**, OBE, m.i.d.; **Salisbury**, Southern Rhodesia; born **New South Wales**, 14 Nov 1913; dental mechanic; OC 6 RMT Coy Feb 1942-Sep 1943; NZASC Base Trg Depot Sep 1943-Apr 1944; Pet Coy May-Jul 1944.

⁴ **Capt J. A. McAlpine**, MBE, MC; born **Ashburton**, 26 May 1910; farmer; OC 4 RMT Coy 19 Jan-10 Feb 1941; killed in action 18 Apr 1941.

Along the coast a British force, assisted by the Navy, would demonstrate against Maktila; in the extreme south, part of 7 Armoured Division would cover the Sofafi camps. The rest of the force would strike through the Bir Enba gap, tanks and infantry circling east to take Nibeywa and the Tummar outposts while another force of tanks and artillery drove north to cut the coast road.

The first stage was another 50-mile move across the open desert on 8 December, a clear day perfect for ground navigation but disturbing for those who feared Italian air attacks. The Royal Air Force, however, kept the skies clear and the long columns halted about 15 miles south-east of the Nibeywa camp. The I tanks (Matildas) rolled up amidst clouds of dust and night fell with the artillery pounding away along the coast and nervous flares glowing in the distance over the Italian camps.

Before first light on 9 December 4 Indian Division was edging through the gap, hundreds of vehicles in orderly confusion steering through the haze of a rising sandstorm. Before 9 a.m. Nibeywa camp and 4000 Italians had been captured by 11 Indian Brigade, another force was racing north to cut the coast road and the first steps were being taken to encircle the Tummar encampments.

Fifth Indian Brigade in the trucks of 4 RMT Company was being driven through the now swirling sand to a point west of Tummar West. But at 10 a.m., when the stage was set for the assault, the sandstorm made it impossible to find that objective. There was a pause until 1 p.m., when the barrage opened up and tanks, Bren carriers and then lorry-borne infantry moved off towards Tummar West. The dust and the smoke from burning dumps limited visibility, but before long the armoured vehicles were lumbering through the outer lines. 'The infantry followed up in lorries to within 150 yards of the walls. The drivers of these lorries were New Zealanders who showed great bravery under fire in bringing their vehicles so close to the enemy position; many of them accompanied the infantry in the assault after debussing.' ¹

First Royal Fusiliers (A Section 4 RMT Company) began the mopping up and 3/1 Punjab Regiment (C Section) carried on, methodically capturing strongpoints, dugouts and over 3000 Italians.

At the same time **4/6 Rajputana Rifles** (B Section 4 RMT Company), who had remained in their vehicles, edged along the north side of the camp to attack **Tummar East**. As they approached they met a counter-attack of infantry and tanks. The infantry debussed and another bewildering action developed, with clouds of dust, roving tanks, infantry digging in and trucks being hurriedly

¹ *The Tiger Strikes*, p. 27—a history of 4 Indian Division.

withdrawn. As before, some of the 4 RMT drivers attacked with the infantry, Sergeant **Thomson** ¹ leading an LMG section of Indians and capturing a machine-gun post. The 3/1 Punjab Regiment came up in support, the Italian tanks were knocked out and by nightfall the counter-attack had faded away. As it was then too late to resume the advance upon **Tummar East**, patrols were sent out to screen the eastern approaches and the battalions were warned to be ready to move at first light.

To the rear the Advanced Dressing Station with 5 Indian Brigade was receiving hundreds of cases—Indian, British and Italian— casualties from the Tummar camps and casualties sent over from the **Sidi Barrani** sector. The medical staff, among them 4 RMT Company's medical officer, Lieutenant **Lomas**, ² had to work in the open, often under fire, all that night and most of the following day, until the Main Dressing Station was established.

The following day, 10 December, the Italian defences began to crack. The great encampment of **Sidi Barrani** fell that afternoon and in the central sector **4/6 Rajputana Rifles**, transported by B Section 4 RMT Company, took **Tummar East**. In the rear areas there was a period of comparative quiet when convoys of lorries, including many from 4 RMT

Company, were sent back with Italian prisoners. They left late in the afternoon; the wind had then died down and in the clear moonlight they groped through the minefields and reached the prisoner-of-war cages next morning.

All that day, 11 December, mopping-up went on in the forward areas. Whole divisions were surrendering in the coastal sector while others, pursued by the armoured units, retired in disorder towards **Sollum**. In the Tummar sector an isolated force at Point 90 surrendered after little opposition; there had been concentrations of shellfire, the initial approach by the tanks, and the entry of 3/1 Punjab Regiment in the lorries of C Section 4 RMT Company.

That evening, 11–12 December, preparations were made to attack **Sofafi**, the only outpost in the original defences still held by the Italians. Fourth Indian Division was hurriedly assembled; the New Zealand drivers who had taken the Indians into Point 90 and those who were returning from the prisoner-of-war cages were given no time to rest. The division was away and had been moving for some hours before an intelligence report was received to say that the Italians were pulling out and that the harrying of their retreating

¹ **WO I R. H. Thomson**, DCM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Port Chalmers**, 19 Feb 1912; school-teacher; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² **Maj A. L. Lomas**, MC, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born **Wanganui**, 30 Jun 1916; medical practitioner; RMO NZASC Jan 1940–Jun 1941; **4 Fd Amb** Jun 1941–Jun 1942; OC **Maadi Camp Hosp** Jun 1942–Apr 1943; DADMS 2 NZ Div Aug 1943–Apr 1944.

columns was now a task for the armoured units. There and then a halt was ordered, leaving everyone free to get some sleep.

‘This last manoeuvre was probably the most brilliant performance of the [4 Indian] Division; without a single written order, after three days continuous fighting and moving in a thick duststorm, the units

disengaged themselves from the aftermath of a battle, replenished with petrol, food and water, and moved through the dark for 25 miles over previously unreconnoitred country.' ¹

Fourth Indian Division took no further part in the campaign. Some of the units returned next day to the **Baggush** area; others followed after salvaging equipment and guarding prisoners of war. Fourth RMT Company remained to evacuate prisoners and transport fuel until 15 December, when it returned to work along the coast road.

By this time the Italians had organised a rearguard and were holding the escarpment that runs inland from the coast at **Sollum** to **Fort Capuzzo** and to **Halfaya Pass**. The immediate problems for the **Western Desert Force** were, therefore, the evacuation of the 40,000 prisoners of war and the accumulation of men and supplies for the inevitable offensive. **Mersa Matruh** with its railhead and field depots was now 140 miles from the forward area and sections of the coast road had still to be cleared of mines. The desert tracks, however, were still available, so the question was more one of transport than of highways. Every available transport unit, including those of the New Zealand Division, had to be brought forward to relieve the strain.

The Supply Column, the Petrol Company, and the Ammunition Company (A Section) became links in the endless chain that ran out with supplies and came back loaded with Italian prisoners. The transport vehicles from 4 Brigade came up from the **Baggush Box** and, on 12–20 December, Major **Burrows** ² with a convoy of 220 lorries took out petrol and oil and brought back prisoners. Fifth Field Park Company at **Baggush** and 19 Army Troops Company (1, 2 and 3 Sections), who had gone out from **Maadi** to **Baggush** on 14 December, had to release every available driver for the movement of trucks and road machinery to **Charing Cross**.

The salvaging of enemy vehicles was another way of relieving the shortage of transport. The Italians had abandoned a large

¹ *The Tiger Strikes*, p. 34.

² **Brig J. T. Burrows**, CBE, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO **20 Bn** May 1941, Dec 1941–Jul 1942; **20 Bn** and Armd Regt Aug 1942–Jun 1943; comd **4 Bde** 27–29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul–15 Aug 1942; **5 Bde** Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; **6 Bde** Jul–Aug 1944; Commander, Southern Military District, Nov 1951–Oct 1953; Commander K Force, Nov 1953–Nov 1954; Commander, SMD, Jan 1955–.

number of 10-ton diesel-engined lorries, so 4 Brigade had to supply mechanics who could operate them. From 18 to 25 December a party of 3 officers and 120 other ranks was at Smugglers' Cove, and afterwards in the **Mersa Matruh– Garawla** area, repairing damaged vehicles and instructing **Royal Army Service Corps** drivers. Any men from 19 Army Troops Company who had diesel-engine experience were sent to **Sidi Barrani** to salvage Lancia and Fiat lorries; others searched the captured positions for any of the 2000-litre water trucks.

At this stage the railway line and the New Zealand railway companies waiting to extend it westwards from **Mersa Matruh** were still far to the rear. The railwaymen had received their warning orders on 8 December, the day before the offensive opened. Group Headquarters had moved up from **Baggush** to **Mersa Matruh** and 9 Survey Company had begun to survey sidings at **Similla** and possible routes to the south of **Sidi Barrani**. By mid-December 13 Railway Construction Company had a detachment working on the escarpment above **Garawla**; another was with 10 Railway Construction Company at **Similla**. In the original plan they were to have constructed four miles of track each day, but this was impossible without certain mechanical equipment, of which there was none in the **Middle East**, and some thousands of tons of railway plate which were reserved for the supply lines feeding the depots of the Nile Valley. Their activities were restricted to preparatory work which would obviate any delays in plate-laying when the material did arrive. But even

then the engineers had their problems. The Arab labourers were difficult to handle and the weather, until the New Year, brought rain, cold winds and swirling sandstorms.

In the meantime the British had prepared to attack the rearguard at **Halfaya Pass**, but the Italians had wilted once again, withdrawing from their strongpoints and halting about 20 miles away at **Bardia**, a small town with white-walled houses set on the cliffs above a miniature harbour. Mussolini had called it a bastion of Fascism, but over 40,000 Italian soldiers were now trapped behind its minefields and its barbed-wire perimeter. Unable at this stage to risk a dramatic but possibly costly victory, Wavell was content to maintain the siege and patiently prepare for a full-scale assault. So with **7 Armoured Division** screening the western flank and probing along the highway towards **Tobruk**, 16 British Brigade was assembled to the south-east and 6 Australian Division brought up to attack **Bardia** from the south-west.

In these preparations the New Zealand transport units had many different roles to play. Fourth RMT Company on 17 December transported 16 Australian Brigade from **Sidi Haneish** to an assembly point near **Sidi Barrani**, but its regular work was the conveyance of supplies from the port of **Sollum** to the dumps along the escarpment. As speed of delivery was essential the company worked on a twenty-four-hour schedule, with half the trucks operating during the day and the other half at night.

The essential item for transport at this stage of the advance was the water brought up by sea from **Mersa Matruh**. Two water barges, each operated by crews of four from 19 Army Troops Company, came up to **Sollum** on the night of 22–23 December. The men then began a succession of difficult days. Air raids had to be endured, 40-gallon water drums had to be filled for transportation by 4 RMT Company and, at night, the barges had to be taken back along the coast to meet naval craft bringing more water. At all costs they had to be back before dawn, when the guns in **Bardia** began to shell the escarpment above the waterfront.

On the morning of 24 December there was no air raid, but the hours dragged on and the atmosphere had that intensity which suggests the approach of violent action. The barge crews were filling the water drums and a mixed group of British, Australian, Cypriot and New Zealand troops was unloading two other barges which had come in with oranges and tinned beer for Christmas Day, when suddenly about midday Italian aircraft came over to bomb with unusual and devastating accuracy.

The bomb which hit one of the supply barges and those which burst on the wharf caused the most serious loss yet experienced by the Division. Six men from 4 RMT Company and one from 19 Army Troops Company were killed and six from 4 RMT Company wounded. ¹

There was, however, no pause in the work. The great problem of the moment was the shortage of transport for the creation of forward supply depots and the conveyance of troops to attack **Bardia**. Fourth RMT Company worked all through Christmas Day ² and all through that night on the run from **Sollum** to the desert depots. After that it was recalled to the main stream of traffic between **Sollum** and **Sidi Haneish**, where the work was long and arduous, drivers loading and off-loading, engines being replaced and aged vehicles being coaxed to remain on the road.

This meant that the conveyance of the Australian infantry to the outskirts of **Bardia** was a task for the other transport units. In

¹ Corporal O. T. Pussell, the first New Zealand soldier to be wounded, was one of those who were killed.

² The majority of the units, including 4 Brigade in the **Baggush Box**, had a Christmas Day with simple extras provided by the National Patriotic Fund. As the weather in the desert was cold and bleak, all ranks paraded for church services in greatcoats.

two journeys—on 26–28 and 29–31 December—the Petrol Company

and the Supply Column brought 17 Australian Brigade from Sidi Haneish to an assembly point beyond **Sollum**. On 30 December 4 Brigade Group sent its transport under the command of Major Burrows to convey 19 **Australian Brigade** from **Burg el Arab** to the outskirts of **Bardia**, a 350-mile journey with two nights on the road and two days travelling to the debussing point beyond Fort **Capuzzo**. Major-General I. G. Mackay, at whose urgent request the brigade had been brought forward, reported to **General Freyberg** that it was 'a wonderful piece of work by your men for they moved us in two days, instead of the three ordained, right from **Burg el Arab** to **Capuzzo**. Your drivers were untiring and were determined to get my men here in spite of the heavy traffic on indifferently surfaced roads.' The commander of the **Western Desert Force**, Lieutenant-General O'Connor, was more comprehensive in his praise. He thanked **General Freyberg** for the 'excellent work' of his 4 RMT Company and the first- and second-line transport; he did not know what he 'should have done without them.'

In other words, the pieces upon the chessboard were now so placed that General O'Connor could make a full-scale attack upon **Bardia**. On 3 January British tanks and Australian infantry broke through the outer defences and by 5 January had the town and 45,000 prisoners. At the same time **7 Armoured Division** was rattling up the coast road encircling the port of **Tobruk** and forcing the Italians to abandon the airfields at **Gazala**, **Tmimi** and **Bomba**.

The New Zealand units took no part in these swift thrusts, but they were called forward when **13 Corps**¹ assembled its forces for the assault upon **Tobruk**. The first to arrive were the engineers of 5 Field Park Company, who entered **Bardia** on 6 January, the day after its capture. Only a week before, after four months in the **Baggush** area, they had been grouped with three British field companies to form Corps Troops, **Royal Engineers**. Since then they had been moving up to the forward area, practically following the sound of the guns.

In **Bardia**, and elsewhere, the British field companies were given the larger tasks such as road maintenance and dock work; 5 Field Park

Company was given a variety of duties calling for more specialised skill. It had to re-establish the water system, salvage diesel-engined lorries and prepare tank trailers for the transportation of water to the forces that were now collecting 75 miles away outside **Tobruk**.

That town was twice the size of **Bardia**, with an adequate water supply, strong ground defences and the best harbour between

¹ On 1 January 1941 **Western Desert Force** had become **13 Corps**.

Alexandria and **Benghazi**. Within it were 25,000 Italian soldiers, and patrolling outside was a small force from **7 Armoured Division** which had to be reinforced without delay. In readiness for such an emergency **4 RMT Company** had been withdrawn from the **Sollum** area and warned to prepare for troop-carrying duties. On 6 January the sections were out in the desert taking supplies to the field depots when a Lysander flew over and dropped orders to report to Headquarters **6 Australian Division** in **Bardia**. That evening the company assembled in the town, **19 Australian Brigade** embussed and a difficult journey commenced. There was no moon and several vehicles ran off the tarsealed road, but by midday on 7 January the Australians were debussing a few miles east of **Tobruk**. The operation was repeated on two successive nights until the brigade was in its pre-arranged position east of **Tobruk**.

This was not the prelude to any headlong attack. The Italians in **Tobruk** were trapped and **7 Armoured Division** was now far beyond the port, driving the rearguards along the coast road to **Derna** or across the desert to **Mechili**. But **Tobruk** with its minefields and coastal defences could not be assaulted without careful reconnaissance and adequate resources. There still had to be a period of aggressive patrolling and of uninterrupted activity along the lines of communication.

In this phase the more forward of the New Zealand units were those in and about **Sollum**. Fourth RMT Company after its dash to the

outskirts of **Tobruk** with the Australian infantry brigade was now moving supplies from the wharf to the depots along the coast road. The engineers from 19 Army Troops Company still operated their two barges, not for the conveyance of water—for the wells at **Fort Capuzzo** were now in working order—but as lighters to carry supplies from the ships in the bay to the jetty below the escarpment. The barges had become important links in the supply line, important enough by mid-January for the naval authorities to protest to Headquarters **13 Corps** when orders were received for the crews to return to **Maadi Camp** with the rest of the company. As a result **General Freyberg**, in spite of his desire to collect all his scattered units, agreed that the men should remain with the barges until new crews could be obtained.

The other New Zealanders at **Sollum** were volunteers with seafaring or waterfront experience who had been sent up from the railway companies. Those who worked on the miniature waterfront checking cargoes and arranging for the movement of stores to the field depots were attached to 199 Railway Operating Company, **Royal Engineers**. The tug crews were seconded to the **Navy** for duty and controlled by the Naval Officer in Command, **Sollum**. The port, having only one jetty, was used as an open roadstead, the ships anchoring in the bay and cargoes being ferried ashore in **Jaffa** lighters, which carried about ten tons each and resembled double-ended surf boats. The tugs had to tow these lighters, and, as there were only the four tugs and sometimes as many as twenty vessels in the bay, the crews worked very long hours. Italian prisoners and hospital cases were taken out and stores brought back.

The other units were farther back along the highway to **Cairo**. Nineteenth Army Troops Company had some men lifting minefields and salvaging equipment about **Sidi Barrani** and others at **Mersa Matruh** putting the water system into working order. Beyond them again, with **Qasaba** as their base, were the Petrol Company, the Supply Column and A Section of the Ammunition Company. Their trucks were in the endless stream of vehicles now taking supplies from the railhead at **Mersa Matruh** to the field depots and returning with Italian prisoners and

salvaged equipment. This work, apart from some convoys to **Siwa** oasis and the transportation of a Polish battalion from **Mersa Matruh** to **Sidi Barrani**, was to occupy them until February, when they were recalled to **Helwan Camp** to prepare for the campaign in **Greece**.

The last group of New Zealanders were 4 Brigade and the attached units who were still working and training in the **Baggush** Box. They had been given a negative, colourless role in the campaign; in fact they were standing in the wings, still waiting for their cue. And now, late in December, after a bleak Christmas, orders were received to move back to **Helwan Camp**. To explain why they had not been given a more active part to play, General Wavell on 27 December wrote a note for the New Zealand Division. It was marked confidential and may not have been for the rank and file, but as an explanation and an apology it is useful to historians:

NOTE FOR THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION FROM GENERAL WAVELL

27 December 1940

I feel that I owe an explanation to the New Zealand Division, and especially to the 4th Infantry Brigade, regarding the recent operations in the **Western Desert**. I know that they are disappointed at not having taken part in the advance on **Sidi Barrani** or beyond, and perhaps feel hurt that they have been used for all the hard work of making defences and then have not been detailed to take part in the attack when attack became possible.

I therefore give you the reasons which influenced the decision not to use them in the advance. It was my original intention to do so. But the New Zealand Government, quite naturally and quite rightly, has always wished that the New Zealand Division should be employed in active operations only as a complete division under its own Commander. I am sure that if I had been able to explain the situation to the **New Zealand Government**, they would have granted permission for the 4th Infantry Brigade to be used, as they have granted permission for the special use

of a part of the forces they have supplied. At the time when the decision had to be taken, however, it was still several weeks before the operations were to take place, the strictest possible secrecy was being maintained, and the number of those who knew that an operation was to take place at all was extremely limited. To consult the **New Zealand Government** would necessarily have involved the communication of some details of the plans to several people and possibly some discussion of them. It would have been necessary to place the Brigade under the command of the Commander of the 4th Indian Division. I felt that I could not do all this without some detailed explanation to the New Zealand Government which might have jeopardised secrecy. I therefore decided, somewhat reluctantly, not to use the New Zealand Brigade, and to use instead the 16th Infantry Brigade which I could do without reference to anyone.

As regards the use of the Australian Division for the second stage of the operations, I required a whole division, and if I had sent forward the New Zealand Brigade it would have been necessary to form a composite division of Australian and New Zealand troops, which I had been given to understand was contrary to the wishes of the **New Zealand Government**. It would have either broken up the New Zealand Division or would have involved a further relief at a later stage with loss of time and waste of transport. It had always been my intention that the Australian Corps should eventually take over the **Western Desert**, and that the New Zealand Division when complete should become the General Headquarters Reserve. This explains why I was unable to send forward the New Zealand Brigade in the second stage of the operations.

As you know, however, the assistance that has been given by the New Zealand Division to the operations in the **Western Desert** has been invaluable, and the recent success could not have been gained without it. The New Zealand Division has supplied its Signals, its transport, its Engineers, Railway and other personnel who have made up our shortage in these very necessary services. I should like to refer also to the magnificent work done by the Long Range Patrols who relieved me of any anxiety about the Southern Libyan Desert, from which the Italians

might have threatened Upper Egypt or the **Sudan**.

I take this opportunity of thanking the New Zealand Division for all the assistance they have so willingly provided during the very difficult period when the defence of Egypt was dangerously weak, and I very much regret that it was not possible for them to take an even greater share in the advance from **Matruh**. Their turn will come before long, and I have every confidence that their leadership, training, and spirit will win them great distinction in any operation in which they take part.

A. P. WAVELL

For units other than 4 Brigade, the period between the capture of **Bardia** and the assault upon **Tobruk**, 5–21 January, was one of intense activity. In the extreme west the two main groups of the Italian Army, still harried by the forward elements of 7 Armoured Division, had withdrawn still farther. The more northerly group stopped at **Derna**, a coastal town on the eastern edge of a fertile area dotted with the neat houses of Italian colonists. From here the main highway and a small-gauge railway turned westwards across **Cyrenaica** and through the Vale of **Barce** to **Benghazi**. The other group was more to the south at **Mechili**, where there was a Beau Geste fortress and the desert crossroads from which routes ran north across the hills to the valley or due west by a desert track to **Benghazi**.

For some days the only threats to Italian security were the patrols from the armoured division. The greater part of **13 Corps** was still outside **Tobruk** in readiness for the attack, which was first held up by the slow arrival of supplies and then postponed by a succession of sandstorms. It was not until 21 January that 6 Australian Division made the assault which broke through the outer perimeter and led to the formal surrender of the town the following afternoon.

The first New Zealanders into the captured town were engineers. On 22 January Lieutenant **Pollock**,¹ who commanded 10 Light Aid Detachment, now attached to 5 Field Park Company, entered behind the

Australian infantry to establish an Advanced Ordnance Workshop. The following day a detachment from 5 Field Park Company was working beyond **Tobruk** with the British engineers who were lifting mines from the main highway. The rest of the company entered the town with 10 Light Aid Detachment on 25 January. The engineers set about lifting mines, salvaging Italian vehicles and repairing the town's water system; the LAD men salvaged trucks and then went forward two days later to **Tmimi**, close by the seaplane base at **Bomba**.

Using the harbour and water supply of **Tobruk**, **13 Corps** could now direct its strength towards **Derna**, another 100 miles along the highway that was still unfolding itself like an interminable liquorice strap. Reinforcements were being rushed forward to the units which were in touch with the Italian rearguard. In fact, 4 RMT Company had been withdrawn from the **Sollum** area and kept standing by for orders, which came immediately after the capture of **Tobruk** and sent it to carry first **19 Australian Brigade** and then **17 Australian Brigade** to the outskirts of **Derna**. On the company's return it joined Rear Headquarters and F Section (Workshops), who had in the meantime been moving from Smugglers' Cove to **Fort Capuzzo**, and finally to the fringe of the airfield at **Tobruk**. With the harbour

¹ **Maj G. D. Pollock**, MBE; born **Temuka**, 16 Jul 1906; sales manager.

cleared for shipping, the company was employed transferring stores from the waterfront to the field depots.

The main thrust against the Italian rearguards was not, however, at **Derna** but in the south near **Mechili**, where **7 Armoured Division** had crossed the rolling stretches of semi-desert, fought a sharp engagement with the Italian armoured units and was now preparing to overwhelm the whole force. The Italians avoided this by withdrawing through the hills to the main highway west of **Derna**.

Plans were then made for a mobile force to strike westwards along the desert track from near **Mechili**. As this could not be attempted without supply depots and armoured reinforcements, pressure was maintained in the **Derna** sector in order to distract attention while the mobile force assembled to the south.

In this dash across the desert, the most dramatic movement in the whole campaign, the only New Zealanders to take any active part were the signalmen with Advanced Headquarters **13 Corps**, who had been moving across North Africa much more sedately than the forward units. After the collapse of the Italian defences at **Sidi Barrani**, they had shifted to **Halfaya Pass**. On New Year's Day some of the long-expected Royal Signals detachment had arrived from **Britain**, but there had been no attempt to send the New Zealanders back to Egypt. After **Bardia** fell they went with Corps Headquarters to **Gambut**, and now, after the fall of **Tobruk**, they were at **Bomba** with Lieutenant-Colonel Agar as the senior New Zealand officer. From here, during the pause before the drive across the desert to **Benghazi**, the first New Zealand signalmen were released. Captain Feeney and 66 other ranks were withdrawn to **Tobruk** and, as escort for 1500 Italians, returned by ship to **Alexandria**. They were back in **Helwan Camp** by 4 February. At Corps Headquarters the Royal Signals took over all office duties; the only New Zealanders left were Colonel Agar, Major A. E. Smith and four wireless detachments, with a detachment from the maintenance section. They remained with Headquarters **13 Corps** for another two weeks, long enough for them to see the abrupt conclusion to the campaign.

The final stage began with the Italians on 30 January pulling back from **Derna**. Sixth Australian Division immediately gave chase, bustling the enemy rearguard along the highway which curves its way through northern **Cyrenaica**. In the south **7 Armoured Division** and the units assembled at **Mechili** were ordered to cross the desert to **Msus**, and from there to reach the highway south of **Benghazi**. By striking along the chord of the circle this highly mobile force would make possible the capture of **Benghazi** and prevent the escape of the Italian **Tenth Army** as

it fell back before the Australians. The margin of error was rather fine: the strength of **7 Armoured Division** had been whittled down to that of one brigade; the supply depots along the desert route were only partially stocked. The force, however, was carrying two days' supply of food, petrol and ammunition so the chances of success and the magnitude of the prize justified the risk.

The columns moved off on 4 February, bumping over the desert all that day and on throughout the moonlit night to reach **Msus** next morning. One force then turned north-west towards Soluch; the other pressed on as before, cutting the highway about 60 miles south of **Benghazi** and collecting, that same evening, over 5000 prisoners.

On 6 February the issue was decided. The Australians who had been driving the Italians through the Vale of **Barce** entered **Benghazi**. South of the town at Beda Fomm the Italians attempted to break through the road block. The day ended with their tanks out of action and a confused column of vehicles jamming the **Benghazi** road for nearly 20 miles. Next day, after another attempt to extricate his force, General Bergonzoli surrendered. The way was then clear for a British group to drive through south-west **Cyrenaica** to **El Agheila**, the gateway to **Tripolitania**.

Advanced Headquarters **13 Corps**, having moved up through **Msus** behind **7 Armoured Division**, went north to **Benghazi**, where the New Zealand signalmen were immediately given the task of repairing and operating the local telephone exchange.

No other New Zealand unit had taken part in this last drive across **Cyrenaica**. C Section 4 RMT Company, led by Captain **Broberg**,¹ had been the nearest to it. It had spent several days running petrol from **Bomba** to 18 Field Supply Depot, the most advanced dump along the track to **Msus**. The rest of the company had entered **Derna** in the wake of the Australians and found it to be a small town with trim white villas and tree-lined avenues, nestling under a steep escarpment and fringing a small harbour. There were hot baths and Italian wines, furnished flats and the many amenities of civilised life that the men had not enjoyed

since they left New Zealand. From this elysium the drivers now had to operate a regular service to **Benghazi**.

The only other New Zealand unit to enjoy these conditions were the engineers of 5 Field Park Company, who had come up close on the heels of the forward troops, repairing roads, lifting mines and re-establishing water supplies. They had erected a water tank at

¹ **Maj R. E. Broberg**, ED; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 5 Mar 1909; mechanical engineer; wounded 24 Apr 1941; senior inspector of munitions, Army HQ, 1943–45.

Tmimi, operated the pumping station at **Martuba**, and had then gone on to **Derna** to repair the power-house and restore the municipal electricity service.

This pleasant interlude did not last very long. The Italians who had built excellent highways before the war were now equally efficient with their demolitions, for over 100 miles away on the road to **Barce** they had destroyed the bridge across a deep, wide gully. The company was ordered to construct another one, so an advance party moved out on 7 February to begin the operation. The rest of the unit, following three days later, established a base in the vaults of the great monument on **Gebel Akhdar**, the mountainous region overlooking the red fields and white homesteads in the Vale of **Barce**. Having little equipment, they improvised as best they could. Tubular steel scaffolding was brought up from the wrecked airfield at **Tobruk** and, despite air raids, the bridge was constructed within four days.

There were very good reasons for this haste to repair the main highway. The naval authorities at **Benghazi** were finding it difficult to clear the harbour and very inconvenient to be operating so close to the Italian airfields in **Tripoli**. Supplies and reinforcements for the units in western **Cyrenaica** had therefore to be landed at **Tobruk** and hurried through by motor transport.

This harbour, which had been cleared for shipping immediately after its capture on 22 January, now received a greater tonnage of shipping than did Sollum. Allied soldiers, Arab and Palestinian labourers, were busy handling the shipping in the harbour and the cargoes along the waterfront. With them were some New Zealanders, men from the railway operating companies, who had been brought up by sea from Alexandria.

Some ships ran straight through from Alexandria to Tobruk but others, more particularly Egyptian ships, were not taken out of Egyptian waters. They were unloaded at Sollum by the New Zealanders who had been left there to operate the tugs and the two water barges. Italian prisoners were taken out to the ships, reinforcements disembarked and were ferried to naval vessels waiting to rush them into Tobruk, and supplies were taken back to the waterfront. To disrupt this routine the enemy dropped acoustic mines into Sollum harbour. All that could be done was to mark their approximate positions, call up minesweepers from Alexandria and leave the crews to carry on as before, with the hope that the cards would be stacked in their favour.

On the morning of 3 February, however, No. 2 water barge, manned by men from 19 Army Troops Company, exploded a mine and disintegrated with the loss of all the crew and many Italian prisoners. Then, in the evening, an engineer from 16 Railway Operating Company was washed off the deck of one of the tugs and drowned in a choppy sea.

No. 1 barge had been more fortunate. The previous night, with one of the tugs in tow, it had set out for Tobruk in company with HMS *Ladybird* and five of the Jaffa barges. They had a rough trip, the tug twice broke away and they were late in arriving outside Tobruk, so late in fact that they nearly missed their chance of following the *Ladybird* through the minefields. A third tug and still more men came up from Sollum within the next week. Those actually working on the water barge and tugs were part of 'Y' Docks Operating Company and under naval control, but later they joined the New Zealanders of the shore staff as part of 1018 Docks Operating Company.

For these New Zealanders this was the beginning of an exacting but exciting period of the war. The work was no different from that at **Sollum**: lighters had to be towed and unloaded, stores had to be sent to the different depots. But the air raids were more severe because **Tobruk**, as the port through which **13 Corps** was supplied, was the natural target for enemy aircraft. And the *Luftwaffe* was now supporting the less aggressive *Regia Aeronautica*. In a very short time their bombs, acoustic mines and low-level strafing had converted the busy harbour into a nautical graveyard that was famous for its sunken ships and its battered waterfront.

In other parts of **Cyrenaica** the enemy was less aggressive, but it is now possible to be wise and to say that the position of **13 Corps** was not as sound as it looked. Its units were reduced in strength and working with worn-out transport. And, throughout February, 6 Australian Division and the different New Zealand units were being withdrawn to join the expeditionary force that was about to sail for **Greece**. The way was thus being cleared, quite unsuspectingly, for the counter-attack which Rommel was to launch on 31 March 1941.

TO GREECE

**CHAPTER 5 – ASSEMBLY AND TRAINING OF THE NEW ZEALAND
DIVISION**

CHAPTER 5

Assembly and Training of the New Zealand Division

IN December 1940, when it was clear that the Italian Army was withdrawing along the North African coast, permission was granted for the New Zealand units to assemble in **Maadi** and **Helwan** camps and there prepare for the spring campaign. The Division was to be in General Headquarters Reserve ready to move at short notice to any theatre of war. There was no certainty just where this would be. The battalions could be sent to **Libya**, to **Abyssinia**, or to any other country in the **Middle East** in which the **German High Command** chose to play its next card. In November **General Freyberg** had informed the **New Zealand Government** that **Germany**, having failed to invade **Britain**, might attack either **Russia** or **Turkey**; in December he thought that the Italian disasters in **Greece** would affect 'German plans for next spring' and that **Greece** as well as **Turkey** was a possible theatre of war.

The immediate problem, however, was the assembly of the scattered Division. There were even doubts about the arrival of reinforcements, though they were essential if the Division was ever to go into action. In August the reinforcements who were to have sailed with the **Third Echelon** were retained for service in **Fiji**. Since then the position in the **Pacific** had deteriorated, and in October the Government warned **General Freyberg** that the growing tension in the **Far East** made it necessary for it to revise its plans for reinforcements to the **Middle East** and to consider whether a proportion of those available should not be sent to **Fiji** at the earliest possible moment. The Government eventually decided that only a section of the **4th Reinforcements** should leave in November. Later on, to the consternation of the General, a shortage of shipping made it necessary to send the remainder in two sections. In the end, however, he was able to act on the assumption that the original total of reinforcements would be adhered to 'without any deficiency'. From December onwards a succession of convoys was to come in from **Britain** and **New Zealand**.

To make way for these reinforcements, 6 Brigade and those units of the Division already in **Maadi Camp** moved out during 9–14 December to **Helwan**, the desert camp near which 2 General Hospital was already established and from which 6 Australian Division had just moved to the **Western Desert**. Henceforward Maadi was left as the Base Camp for HQ 2 NZEF base units and the training units of the Reinforcement Depot.

The first to enter **Maadi Camp** under this new system was the first section of the **4th Reinforcements**, 1487 all ranks, who left **Wellington** on 8 November in HMTs *atony* and *Maunganui* and after an uneventful voyage arrived at **Port Tewfik** on 16 December. They were joined by a small detachment from Divisional Headquarters and Headquarters Divisional Artillery which arrived from England on 29 December.

As the Italian army in North Africa was then in full retreat, there was no reason why several of the units which had been attached to **Western Desert Force** should not return ¹ for divisional training. The long-awaited orders came through and, by 17 January, despite sandstorms and the more urgent transport requirements of the desert army, the battalions of 4 Brigade were in **Helwan Camp**. Sixth Field Company was recalled from the Canal Zone, B Section of the Ammunition Company came in from **Abbassia**, and GHQ **Middle East** at last agreed that the New Zealand units still advancing with **13 Corps** should be recalled as soon as it was convenient for General O'Connor to release them.

For the rank and file of 4 Brigade the important fact was that, during their absence in the desert, efforts had been made to introduce some of the amenities of civilisation to the tented camps at **Maadi** and **Helwan**. The meals were better cooked and had more variety now that the cooks had taken courses at the School of Cookery from the instructors who had, at last, arrived from **Britain**. ² Sports competitions had been organised, the best known being that for the Freyberg Cup, for which rugby teams struggled on such dusty grounds as 'Eden Park' and 'Carisbrook'. Bands had been organised within each brigade and in

March the **Kiwi Concert Party** became an official unit of **2 NZEF**. There was the change-of-air camp at **Alexandria** for those who had leave. And in **Cairo** itself on 5 February, at the corner of Sharia Malika Farida and Sharia Emad el Din, the **New Zealand Club** was opened to 600 men representing all units, and probably enjoying the New Zealand beer sent over

¹ There were two exceptions to this policy of withdrawal. From 4 January to 1 February 1941, A Company 6 Field Ambulance had a casualty clearing station with the Australian troops at **Ikingi Maryut**. During 21–30 January a small convoy from the Ammunition Company (B Section) made a return journey of 1340 miles from **Helwan** to a field depot beyond **Gambut**, taking out urgently needed MT stores and motor engines for 6 Australian Division and returning with Italian equipment and prisoners of war.

² See p. 23.

by the **Patriotic Fund Board**, whose Commissioner in the Middle East was now Colonel Waite. ¹

The other side to the story is one of training and organisation. Training schemes were drawn up and warnings issued about divisional exercises in February and active operations in March. By then it was hoped that 5 Brigade would have arrived from **Britain** and that the rest of the expected reinforcements would have come over from New Zealand.

In **Maadi Camp** elaborate arrangements were being made for the reception and training of these new drafts. The Artillery Training Regiment, the NCOs' School, and the Composite Training Depot for engineers, signallers and **Divisional Cavalry** had already been established. On 15 January 9 Infantry Brigade, with Northern, Central and Southern Training Battalions and a Maori Training Company, was formed under the command of **Brigadier L. M. Inglis**, promoted from command of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion.

At the same time much was done to perfect the organisation and administration of the Division. Groupings for the three brigades ² were settled; 27 (MG) Battalion, originally a non-divisional unit, was absorbed into the Division; 19 Army Troops Company was temporarily attached to 6 Brigade Group to take the place of 8 Field Company, which did not leave New Zealand until 1 February. The plans for a Divisional Reconnaissance Regiment were scrapped when it was realised that a colossal amount of special equipment not then available was necessary.

There was, however, less shortage of the more regular items of clothing and equipment. The authorities were making every effort to issue the troops with the full G1098 ³ equipment. Supplies were coming in through the Red Sea ports and the quartermasters, free to adopt war accounting, were no longer hoarding their treasures. By February it was fashionable for the well-dressed soldier to be wearing khaki drill by day and the new battle-dress uniform at night. Motor vehicles were being issued to replace those ruined in the desert; 25-pounder guns replaced the old 18-pounders and the 45-inch howitzers; the Divisional Cavalry Regiment received Marmon-Harrington armoured cars and the Signals Corps was issued with many tons of equipment. In fact, the only major unit still working under difficulties was the Base Training establishment at Maadi.

¹ Col the Hon. F. Waite, CMG, DSO, OBE, VD, m.i.d.; MLC; farmer; born Dunedin, 20 Aug 1885; NZ Engrs (Capt) 1914–17 (DSO); Commissioner, National Patriotic Fund, Middle East; died Balclutha, Aug 1952.

² With 4 Inf Bde: 4 Fd Regt, 34 Bty 7 A-Tk Regt, 6 Fd Coy, 2 Coy 27 (MG) Bn, 4 Fd Amb. With 5 Inf Bde: 5 Fd Regt, 32 Bty 7 A-Tk Regt, 7 Fd Coy, 3 Coy 27 (MG) Bn, 5 Fd Amb. With 6 Inf Bde: 6 Fd Regt, 33 Bty 7 A-Tk Regt, 8 Fd Coy, 1 Coy 27 (MG) Bn, 6 Fd Amb.

³ The synopsis of the complete equipment of a unit, itemised and enumerated.

Here a shortage of transport and the employment of men on guard duties at the **Tura** caves, 2 General Hospital and **Helwan** prisoner-of-war camp made it difficult to prepare the reinforcement drafts for the Division. ¹

The task for the brigades was to complete the basic training of the men and then, by intensive day and night marches, to have them so fit that they could cover 40 miles in twenty-four hours. By February this was possible and the monotony of the work was then broken by more advanced exercises. The battalions attacked behind the supporting fire of machine guns and mortars or advanced in extended line behind smoke screens to capture imaginary defences in the sandhills; on the route marches they were harried by the **Royal Air Force** or diverted to test the brains and the efficiency of the brigade staffs.

The actual role which the Division was to play had not been defined, but **General Freyberg** had been able to tell his brigadiers that their theatre of war was no longer likely to be the Western Desert. He gave them a general directive envisaging a landing from the sea, and along these lines a considerable amount of training was carried out, the desert escarpments providing the stage setting for actions at the foot of sea cliffs. The battalions practised river crossings, using kapok bridges for the canals and assault boats for the river. The final event was a regular 'Henley on the **Nile**' in which a spectacular variety of craft took part.

All this time reinforcements had been arriving from New Zealand and units returning from the desert. The second section of the 4th Reinforcements, 2301 all ranks, which had left **Wellington** on 20 December on HMTs *Dominion Monarch*, *Empress of Russia* and *Awatea*, arrived at **Port Tewfik** on 28–30 January.

The next to appear was 19 Army Troops Company, whose sections had been working between **Mersa Matruh** and **Sidi Barrani**. They had constructed camps, laid pipelines, perfected a water system about **Mersa**

Matruh, salvaged equipment and lifted Italian minefields. Small detachments had been with 708 Construction Company and with the water barges at **Sollum** and **Tobruk**. In fact, one barge crew was still in **Tobruk** for lightering duties, the naval authorities having asked if the crew could be retained and **General Freyberg** having agreed on condition that the men were replaced as soon as possible. They rejoined the company during the last week of February, in time to leave for **Greece**.

The rest of the company, however, was at **Sidi Barrani** by 31 January with orders to return to **Helwan Camp**. That night the SS **Sollum** with 500 Italian prisoners ran aground on an outer reef.

¹ **2 NZEF** was not relieved of these guard duties until mid-March 1941.

There was a strong wind with high seas, but men from the ship swam ashore with lines to the foot of the coastal escarpment. They were assisted through the breakers by Sergeant **Cookson**, ¹ who organised the rescue work after hawsers had been attached to some heavy trucks. Relays of men spent hours in the bitterly cold surf dragging the Italians to safety; others assisted them into slings and those on the escarpment hauled them to the crest. The wounded had to be brought ashore on Carley floats, so the last stages of their journey were extremely hazardous, but groups of volunteers brought them through the breakers and had everyone ashore by first light. The company was then free to move back to **Helwan** on 3 February.

The railway construction companies, lacking mechanical equipment and dependent upon unreliable native labour, had lost touch with the advancing forces, but the limitations of the railway system had by now been balanced by the capture of **Tobruk** and the acquisition of Italian motor vehicles. The companies were therefore withdrawn for more urgent work in the Canal area. They left early in February: the detachment from 9 Survey Company to join the unit at **Almaza**; Group Headquarters and 13 Railway Construction Company for **Moascar** and

Geneifa respectively; 10 Construction Company for **Qassassin** and 17 Operating Company to **Geneifa**, where it was to control the shunting yards. The only New Zealand railway unit left in the desert was 16 Operating Company on the line from **El Daba** to **Mersa Matruh**.

The next moves in the assembly of the divisional troops now began to take place in swift succession. On 16 February 5 Field Regiment, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment (31 and 32 Batteries) and the advance parties from the other units of 5 Brigade arrived from **Britain**. More important still, **General Freyberg**, on the following day, was told ² by General Wavell that his Division would move to **Greece** as the advanced guard of an Imperial force commanded by General Maitland Wilson.

As if further proof was required to support this verbal order, the units which had been advancing to **Benghazi** with **13 Corps** now began to return. The last of the signalmen—3 officers and 17 other ranks—who had been in the desert ever since the worrying days of June 1940, marched into camp the very same day. The Engineers of 5 Field Park Company and 10 Light Aid Detachment, who had lifted their last mines and completed the construction of their bridge in the **Barce** valley, were moving east along the great highway. They were in **Helwan Camp** by 21 February.

¹ **Sgt T. N. Cookson**; born England, 26 Oct 1905; road engineer.

² See p. 99.

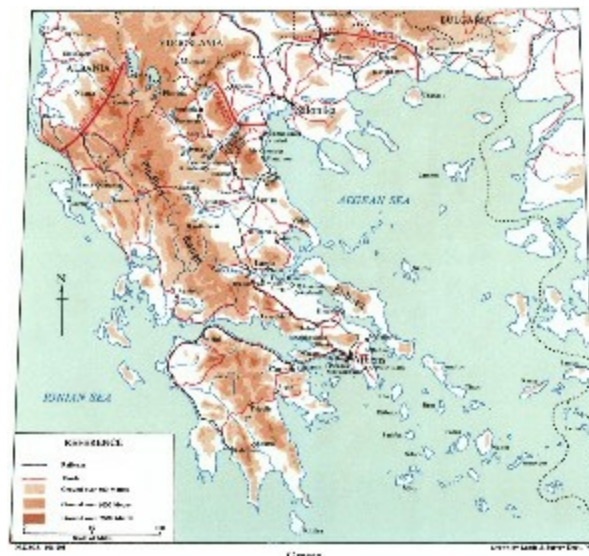
The transport companies were also on the move. The Petrol Company, the Supply Column and A Section of the Ammunition Company came in to **Helwan** from the railhead at **Qasaba** on 21 February. Fourth RMT Company sent its last convoy from **Derna** to **Benghazi** on 22 February, had one driver wounded during an air attack and was back in **Helwan** by the 28th.

For the New Zealand Division this was the end of the Libyan

campaign, the last paragraph of a brief introduction. It had not gone into action as a complete formation, for neither the infantry nor the artillery had been engaged. But the signals, engineer and transport companies had gained invaluable experience. The work of all these units was acknowledged and praised in farewell messages from Lieutenant-General O'Connor and the heads of services in **Western Desert Force (13 Corps). This was the praise which everyone appreciates—praise from the fellow members of one's own craft.**

But the men from the desert had little time to appreciate these messages or to enjoy the now well-organised camps at **Maadi and **Helwan**. The stage was already being prepared for the next act in the drama, for on 28 February when the last trucks were moving into **Helwan** the advance parties from the Division were leaving the camp to join the first convoy to **Greece**. Fourth Brigade Group, went first, then 6 Brigade Group and, finally, 5 Brigade Group, ¹ which had reached Egypt with very little time to spare. On 3 March, when the main body of 4 Brigade left **Helwan**, the first ships of the convoy from **Britain** steamed into **Port Tewfik**, and within a few days the battalions of 5 Brigade, after receiving equipment and completing their training, were preparing for their own move to **Greece**.**

The third section of the **4th Reinforcements brought four units which had been in camp with the **Third Echelon**, and the several thousand reinforcements without whom it would have been unwise for the Division to begin the campaign in **Greece**. Eighth Field Company, commanded by Major **Currie** ² of the **Regular Force**, had come over from **Fiji**; 36 Survey Battery was commanded by Major **Rawle**, ³ 18 Army Troops Company by Major Lincoln and 21 Mechanical Equipment Company by Major **Tiffen**. ⁴ With 3 General**



Greece

¹ See p. 42.

² **Lt-Col A. R. Currie, DSO, OBE; Wellington; born Napier, 12 Nov 1910; military engineer; OC 8 Fd Coy Oct 1940–Jul 1942; CO NZ Engr Trg Depot Apr–Jul 1943; OC 7 Fd Coy Jul–Nov 1943; three times wounded; Director, Fortifications and Works, Army HQ, 1946–49; Chief Engineer, NZ Army, 1951–.**

³ **Maj F. C. Rawle, ED; Auckland; born Auckland, 26 Jun 1905; asst county clerk; OC 36 Svy Bty 1940–41; bty comd 14 Lt AA Regt 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941.**

⁴ **Maj J. H. Tiffen, m.i.d.; Wanganui; born Gisborne, 15 Mar 1903; civil engineer (British Colonial Service, Fiji); OC 21 Mech Equipt Coy Nov 1940–Nov 1943.**

Hospital were two well-known medical officers: Colonel **Gower**, ¹ the commanding officer, who had been with **1 NZ General Hospital** in 1916–18, and Major **Russell**, ² the registrar, who was afterwards for some years Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services, **2 NZEF**.

These units and the mass of unattached reinforcements had left New Zealand on 1 February in HMT *Nieuw Amsterdam* as part of a large

convoy that reached **Bombay** on 22 February. Here they had been broken into sections. One of 1196 all ranks, including 8 Field Company, had boarded HMT *Nevassa* and reached Port **Tewfik** on 15 March. The other section of 2492 all ranks, including 21 Mechanical Equipment Company, 18 Army Troops Company, 36 Survey Battery and 3 General Hospital, had gone to **Deolali** Camp for two weeks before sailing on 11 March in the *Empress of Australia*, *Windsor Castle*, *Nieuw Zeeland* and *Indrapoera*. The convoy reached **Port Tewfik** on 22–23 March and the troops were transferred by train to **Helwan** and **Maadi** camps.

By then the movement ³ to **Greece** was almost complete and the two great camps were clear for the training of the new arrivals. Some were soon required for service in the **Western Desert**; others took over the work of units which had left for **Greece**; all waited for news of the Division and the appearance of their own movement orders.

¹ **Brig G. W. Gower**, CBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born **Invercargill**, 15 Apr 1887; surgeon; medical officer, **1 NZEF**, 1915–19; surgeon, Christchurch Military Hospital, 1919; CO **3 Gen Hosp** Oct 1940–May 1945; DMS **2 NZEF** May–Oct 1945.

² **Lt-Col J. Russell**, m.i.d.; born **Scotland**, 28 Oct 1896; Deputy Director-General, Mental Hospitals, **Wellington**; Capt, 1 Gordon Highlanders, First World War; Registrar **3 Gen Hosp** Oct 1940–Aug 1941; DADMS **2 NZEF** Aug 1941–Nov 1945.

³ See **Chapter 7**.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 6 – THE BALKAN FRONT

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Mr Churchill and the Dominions

TO GREECE

BRITAIN'S POLICY

Britain's Policy

IN April 1939, shortly after the Italian forces had landed in **Albania**, Mr Churchill warned the Prime Minister, Mr Chamberlain, that the 'whole of the Balkan Peninsula' ¹ was at stake. Already convinced that the Axis powers meant war, the British Government guaranteed to support **Greece** and **Rumania** should their independence be threatened. And in May **Turkey** was assured ² that she would be supported should any act of aggression lead to war in the **Mediterranean**.

Once war was declared Churchill was able to enlarge upon the strategic importance of the **Balkans**. In his opinion the course of events and the 'quenchless antagonism' between **Germany** and **Russia** would create not only an eastern front but also a south-eastern one. For the ambitions of **Hitler** and the traditional interest ³ of **Russia** in the **Balkans** were almost certain to be conflicting. **Britain** had therefore been 'fostering this front', strengthening it and 'endeavouring to throw it into simultaneous action should any part of it be attacked....' ⁴

After the collapse of **France** in June 1940 this was no longer possible. Encouraged ⁵ by **Hitler**, **Russia**, **Bulgaria** and **Hungary** stripped **Rumania** of her frontier provinces. In consequence she was soon to be, with **Bulgaria** and **Hungary**, one of the subsidiary allies of **Germany**.

In August Mussolini, without consulting **Hitler**, attempted to intimidate **Greece**. At this stage **Britain** could offer little assistance. Mr Churchill, ever conscious of the importance of the Eastern

¹ Churchill, Vol. I, p. 274.

² On 19 October 1939 a treaty of Mutual Assistance was signed by **Britain**, **France** and **Turkey**.

³ See *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939–41*, documents from the archives of the German Foreign Office, and Churchill, Vol. III, pp. 27–9, for evidence of the distrust with which **Russia** was to observe German activity in the **Balkans**.

⁴ From a paper prepared for the War Cabinet in September 1939: Churchill, Vol. I, p. 352. *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939*, Third Series, Volume V, edited E. L. Woodward and Rohan Butler, show that the Russian proposals for a mutual assistance pact in April 1939 were both concrete and sweeping.

⁵ In the secret protocols of the Non-Aggression Pact of 1939 **Hitler** had agreed that **Russia** should take Bessarabia. To his annoyance she also took Bukovina.

Mediterranean, had already suggested ¹ that if **Italy** attacked **Greece**, then **Britain** and **France** should become responsible for **Crete**. But now that **Britain** stood alone her forces were hopelessly inadequate. Consequently, when General Metaxas (Greek Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs) on 22 August asked what assistance he could expect, he was told that until Egypt was secure no land or sea forces were available for service in the **Balkans**. This did not mean that **Britain** intended to desert **Greece**. Churchill, who was then completing his 'Destroyers for Bases' deal with Roosevelt, stated that the business was urgent, that it might indirectly save **Greece** from invasion. And to reassure **Greece**, the guarantee of British protection was renewed on 5 September.

But no close understanding developed between **Greece** and **Britain**. The former had only two aims in view: '(1) not to become involved in the disputes between the groups of Great Powers, and, (2) to forestall any attempt to use her territory as a theatre of war.'² The British Chiefs of Staff took just as realistic a view of the situation. Troops might possibly be sent to strengthen the garrison in **Crete** but no support could be given

to the Greeks on the mainland. By October conditions had improved, for the invasion of **Britain** had not been attempted and Churchill had risked the despatch of reinforcements to the **Middle East**. But the Chiefs of Staff were still convinced that ‘The front line defence of Egypt did not lie in **Greece**.’

¹ At the Supreme War Council in **Paris** on 31 May. See Churchill, Vol. II, p. 112.

² *The Greek White Book*, p. 64, diplomatic documents relating to **Italy's** aggression against **Greece**.

TO GREECE

HITLER'S PLANS

Hitler's Plans

As it was, the Italian invasion of **Greece** had been postponed, not because of British action but because **Hitler** had called a halt all along the line. He had decided that, if the invasion of **Britain** proved impracticable, his next move must be the invasion of **Russia** and not, as many thought, a thrust south-east to the **Suez Canal** or the **Persian Gulf**. In preparation for this venture he hoped to isolate his Russian victim, bring **Spain** and Vichy France into the war on the side of **Germany** and encourage the **Balkan** states to adhere to the Tripartite Pact. If they would permit the movement of his armies through their territories he could avoid an unnecessary campaign in the **Balkans**; the British would not dare to intervene; and he would have another secure front from which to attack **Russia**.

In his efforts to arrange this he now had several months of delicate negotiations, sometimes brilliantly successful, sometimes rather frustrating. After the Tripartite Pact between **Berlin**, Rome and Tokio ¹ had been signed on 27 September, **Russia** was faced with the possibility of war on two fronts, and the **United States**, under the threat of the **Japanese Fleet**, would 'not dare to move.' ² **Spain** and Vichy France, when approached, were sympathetic but sympathetic only; **Hungary** and **Rumania** gave their support but would not, as yet, admit definite obligations; **Bulgaria** hesitated and, as she was a Slav state with Russian sympathies, **Hitler** did not force her to make any immediate decision.

At this point Mussolini became impatient and reminded the Germans that there was still the problem of **Greece** and **Yugoslavia**. But they took no action and, to make matters worse, **Hitler** when he met Mussolini in the **Brenner Pass** on 4 October did not mention that his troops were about to enter **Rumania**. The occupation which took place three days later was a complete success but the secrecy of the move aroused the

jealousy of Mussolini. Objecting to the *fait accompli*, he decided to make his own decisions. So, without mentioning any fixed date, he informed **Hitler** that he would soon invade **Greece**. It was 'one of the strong points of British strategy in the **Mediterranean**' ³ and had to be liquidated. Now thoroughly alarmed and determined 'to prevent under all circumstances an expansion of the conflict in the **Balkans** and the Eastern Mediterranean,' ⁴ **Hitler** suggested a conference, but when he met Mussolini at **Florence** on 28 October he was told that Italian divisions were already moving from **Albania** into **Greece**. 'Führer, we are on the march.' ⁵

¹ **Japan** would enter the European war and support the Axis powers if the **United States** entered on behalf of **Britain**.

² *Ciano's Diary, 1939–1943*, p. 291.

³ Mussolini to **Hitler**, 19 Oct 1940 (German Foreign Office archives).

⁴ **International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg**. *The Trial of the Major War Criminals*, Vol. IX, p. 334. Hereafter this source will be referred to as N.D., Nuremberg Documents.

⁵ N.D., Vol. X, p. 287.

TO GREECE

PLANS FOR BARBARITY FORCE

Plans for Barbarity Force

The position of **Britain** was quite clear. As she had already warned the Greeks not to expect intervention on the mainland, Mr Churchill was perfectly justified in telling the House of Commons that ‘We have most carefully abstained from any action likely to draw upon the Greeks the enmity of the criminal dictators. For their part, the Greeks have maintained so strict a neutrality that we were unacquainted with their dispositions or their intentions.’⁶ Nevertheless, when the Greeks invoked the guarantee of April 1939, **Britain** was morally bound to give some assistance. In fact King George VI, by the advice of the War Cabinet, cabled to the King of the Hellenes: ‘Your cause is our cause: we shall be fighting against a common foe.’

On the other hand it was doubtful just what **Britain** could do. General Metaxas wanted the **Navy** to defend Corfu and the Royal Air Force to cover **Athens**, but the only assistance possible was the despatch on 1 November of a force to occupy the naval base at **Suda Bay** in **Crete**. The battalions were intended for **Malta**, but Churchill held that the loss of **Crete** would be ‘a grievous aggravation of all **Mediterranean** difficulties.’ The British Minister in **Athens**¹ suggested, however, that although Greek morale was high the non-appearance of British aircraft was encouraging some criticism. So, without waiting for instructions, the Air Commander-in-Chief, **Middle East**, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, had No. 30 Blenheim Squadron in **Greece** by 3 November. His statement was a good explanation of the whole problem: ‘It seems that it has become politically absolutely essential to send a token force to **Greece** even at the expense of my forces here.’²

Churchill considered this move to be both wise and bold. In his opinion, every effort must be made to assist the Greeks. They were determined to resist the Italians; prolonged fighting in the **Balkans** was

inevitable; and the ‘collapse of **Greece** without any effort by us will have deadly effect on **Turkey** and on future of war.’ The commanders-in-chief in the **Middle East** were still inclined to worry about the security of **Egypt**, which was essential if the support of **Turkey** was to be retained, but Churchill was convinced that the forces with General Wavell were more than sufficient for the defence of that country and for the offensive in **East Africa**. ‘No one will thank us for sitting tight in **Egypt** with ever-growing forces while Greek situation and all that hangs on it is cast away. Loss of **Athens** far greater injury than **Kenya** and **Khartoum....**’³

Such being the case, the Government decided, as a long-term investment, to send still more assistance to the Greeks. On 4 November General Wavell was instructed to give **Greece** all possible moral and material support at the earliest possible moment. As soon as properly defended airfields were ready, BARBARITY Force—five squadrons of the **Royal Air Force** with all equipment and ancillary services—must be sent to **Greece**.

⁶ Speech, 4 November 1940. Quoted from *The Greek White Book*, pp. 8–9.

¹ Sir Michael Palairret, KCMG.

² Major-General I. S. O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. I, p. 230.

³ Churchill, Vol. II, p. 476.

TO GREECE

SUGGESTION THAT NEW ZEALAND TROOPS BE SENT TO CRETE

Suggestion that New Zealand Troops be Sent to Crete

Britain also offered to be responsible for the security of **Crete**, an important strategic point in the Eastern Mediterranean; 'failure to hold it would be a military and political disaster of the first order.'¹ British troops were already in the **Suda Bay** area, but if additional battalions were sent the Greeks could transfer their own garrison to the Albanian front. As he was then preparing for the First Libyan Campaign, General Wavell could not withdraw any troops from the **Western Desert** but he could send over some of the units which had been left in Egypt for purposes of internal security.

Consequently, the **New Zealand Government** on 8 November was asked if some of the battalions in **Maadi Camp** could be sent to **Crete**. As Wavell was working with inadequate resources, **General Freyberg** considered that the wishes of **Britain** should willingly be met. The Government thereupon agreed to the proposal, provided the troops were fully equipped and sufficiently trained. But it again reminded the British Government that the New Zealand Division was still split into three groups: 6 Brigade in **Maadi Camp**, 4 Brigade in the desert and 5 Brigade in **Britain**. If they were to operate as a complete formation in 1941 they must be brought together for advanced training. This mild protest possibly had some effect for the plan was dropped and **United Kingdom** troops² were sent to **Crete**.

¹ *Documents*, Vol. I, p. 193.

² 2 **York** and Lancaster Regiment landed on 1 November, HQ 14 Brigade and an anti-aircraft regiment on 6 November and 2 **Black Watch** on 19 November.

TO GREECE

CAUTIOUS ATTITUDE OF BRITISH GOVERNMENT

Cautious Attitude of British Government

At the same time every care was taken to give the Greeks no reason to hope for immediate relief. The staff officer sent over as an observer was warned that he must not make any promises or give any undertakings to the Greek General Staff. No. 27 Military Mission to **Greece**, established by the Chiefs of Staff, **Middle East**, which had to report upon the situation was given similar instructions: 'You will not commit His Majesty's Government even by implication to the provision of any such requirements as may be referred to you by the **Greek Government**. Nor will you encourage any expectation of specific support without prior sanction in order that false hopes may not be raised.'³ An inter-services mission to **Greece** from **London** was instructed that the policy was to sustain Greek resistance without committing forces in **Greece** which were vital for security elsewhere.

After 11 November there was some improvement in the situation, for the naval aircraft which attacked the Italian warships in **Taranto** harbour decisively altered the balance of power in the **Mediterranean**. More convoys could sail through the Straits of Gibraltar, the **Navy** had greater security along the North African coast and the protection of convoys to **Malta** and to **Greece** had been simplified. As an Italian army had still to be dealt with in North Africa, this increased security did not mean that greater assistance could now be offered to **Greece**, but it did mean that a campaign in **Greece** in 1941 was not impossible.

Nevertheless the British Government, unwilling to open another front and anxious to respect the wishes of the Greeks, still acted very cautiously. The base for **BARBARITY** Force had to be capable of expansion to accommodate two divisions, but the Greeks were on no account to be informed of this possibility. The best site for it, strategically, was the flat country near **Salonika**, but as aircraft from that area could bomb

the Rumanian oilfields the Greeks feared that its establishment would provoke direct action by Germany. The force after it reached Greece on 16 November was accordingly dispersed, the bombers to airfields near Athens and the fighters to whatever grounds could be found near the fighting line.

³ Rich, Vol. I, Ch. I, p. 16, para. 26.

TO GREECE

FIRST NEW ZEALAND TROOPS IN GREECE

First New Zealand Troops in Greece

In **BARBARITY Force** there were about 4000 men, half of whom came from the **Royal Air Force** and half from the Army. They had been collected very hastily, so hastily that **General Freyberg** did not know that on **HMAS Sydney** and **SS Nieuw Zeeland** there had been **No. 3 Section 9 New Zealand Railway Survey Company** (Captain **Nevins**¹), which a week before had been quietly doing survey work in **Palestine**. As its arrival was immediately noticed by newspaper correspondents and radio commentators, the **New Zealand Government** naturally inquired as to the truth of their reports. **Headquarters 2 NZEF**, however, knew nothing about the movement because the railway companies were under the control of the **Director-General of Transportation, Middle East**. **General Headquarters, Middle East**, flatly contradicted the reports. The **New Zealand Government** made inquiries in **London** but nothing was known there about the surveyors. The news was repeated, further inquiries were made, and in December **General Headquarters, Middle East**, was apologising for its misinformation and admitting that a section had actually been sent to **Greece**. Thereafter the **New Zealand Government** insisted that **Headquarters 2 NZEF** or the **High Commissioner in London** had to be informed of the employment of **New Zealand troops** in any theatre of war in which **2 NZEF** was not itself engaged.

The section worked about **Piræus** and **New Phaleron**, prepared camp sites, surveyed minor railway extensions, and finally a base depot to the west of **Athens**, at which it was working when the Germans eventually invaded **Greece**.

¹ **Maj T. H. F. Nevins; Wellington; born NZ 23 Nov 1903; civil engineer.**

TO GREECE

HITLER DECIDES TO ATTACK GREECE

Hitler Decides to Attack Greece

By this time **Hitler** had made several important decisions. As a result of the Italian invasion of **Greece** no panzer divisions would, as yet, be sent to **Libya**. Support would be given to the Italians in **Albania**¹ and a German force would occupy northern **Greece**. Air cover would be provided for the Rumanian oilfields, **Bulgaria** would be assisted against possible attack by **Turkey**, and in the Western Mediterranean, with Franco's assistance, Gibraltar would be occupied.

Unfortunately for **Hitler** the problem soon became more complicated. In November, the British, by bombing the Italian warships in **Taranto** harbour, gained greater prestige in the **Balkans** and a much better strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean. The further reverses of the Italians in **Albania** were even more important, for the minor powers were then encouraged to await the outcome of events or to raise the price for their support. **Hungary** and **Rumania** were still sympathetic, but neither **Spain** nor Vichy **France** was certain that the last word had been spoken. In the opinion of **Hitler's** naval staff, the campaign was clearly a regrettable blunder which had created the greatest strategic, political and psychological difficulties. And **Hitler** himself now informed Mussolini that he wished 'Above all' to have delayed the invasion of **Greece** 'until a more favourable time, at any rate until after the American Presidential Election.'²

To meet the situation he now decided that every possible effort must be made 'to turn **Russia** away from the **Balkans** and to direct her towards the Orient.' **Russia** was therefore offered her share of the British Empire and a political and economic alliance with the countries of the Tripartite Pact— **Germany**, **Italy** and **Japan**. But the discussions with Molotov when he was in **Berlin** on 12–13 November were not encouraging. His questions were often difficult to answer. When Molotov

wanted, for instance, to know something about the fate of **Hungary** and **Rumania**, of **Greece** and **Yugoslavia**, **Hitler** had to admit that he was interested in the southern **Balkans**: 'The idea was intolerable to **Germany** that England might get a foothold in **Greece**' for the establishment of air and naval bases. Molotov returned to **Moscow** and the formal

¹ The Italians did not accept this proposal.

² N.D., Vol. III, p. 137. See also p. 93, note 1.

reply to the German proposals came from Stalin on 26 November. He made it quite clear that **Russia** wished to increase her influence in the Baltic, the Black Sea and the oilfield areas about **Iraq** and Iran. As such designs ran contrary to his own, **Hitler** sent no definite reply; he preferred to warn his commanders-in-chief on 18 December that 'The German Armed Forces must be prepared even before the end of the war against England, to overthrow Soviet **Russia** in a rapid campaign (Operation Barbarossa).'

With Greece, on the other hand, there was no suggestion of negotiations. The Mediterranean situation had to be liquidated 'that winter', so **Hitler**, although he complained about the Italian disasters in **Albania**, was prepared to give Mussolini every assistance, for the British, by using bases in **Greece**, were quite likely to attack ¹ the oil refineries in **Rumania**. Decisive counter measures had therefore to be taken. With the assistance of **Spain** the western gateway to the **Mediterranean** must be closed; the *Luftwaffe* had to block the **Suez Canal** and destroy the British fleet. After these opening moves there would be a spring campaign in **Greece** for which it was essential to have the positive collaboration of **Yugoslavia**. He told Mussolini that the German divisions would have to be out of **Greece** by 1 May, but he did not tell him that they were wanted for the campaign in **Russia**.

Hitler then hastened to complete his system of alliances. Hungary,

Rumania and **Slovakia** adhered to the Tripartite Pact but **Bulgaria** would do no more than promise to permit the passage of German troops to the boundaries of **Greece**. Shortly afterwards, the plans for the capture of Gibraltar were abruptly postponed ² by General Franco. The British Navy was still intact and the economic condition of **Spain** was such that she could not enter the war until **Britain** was on the point of collapse. This was a disappointing but not a major setback. Determined to be secure in at least the Eastern Mediterranean, **Hitler** confirmed on 13 December his orders for Operation MARITA. *Twelfth Army* supported by *8 Air Corps* was to take north **Greece** and, if necessary, all **Greece** in order to prevent the British opening up a **Balkan** front from which they could bomb both **Italy** and the Rumanian oilfields.

¹ In a proclamation issued on 6 April, the day **Greece** was invaded, **Hitler** gave an additional reason: 'From the beginning of the struggle it has been England's steadfast endeavour to make the **Balkans** a theatre of war We shall never ... tolerate a power establishing itself on Greek territory with the object at a given time of being able to advance thence from the south-east into German living space.'— *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Vol. I, p. 787.

² The British victories in North Africa during December 1940–February 1941, the bombardment of Genoa by the **Navy** and the passage of the aircraft-carrier *HMS Illustrious* through the **Mediterranean** decided the matter. On 26 February Franco informed **Hitler** that the Protocol 'agreed upon in October must now be considered outmoded.'

TO GREECE

BRITAIN DECIDES TO ASSIST GREECE

Britain Decides to Assist Greece

The British throughout these months, November–December 1940, had been attempting to deduce just what **Hitler** intended to do. With his army massing in **Rumania**, and with **Bulgaria** apparently willing to permit the passage of his troops, he might be preparing to assist the Italians in **Greece** or he might be planning to strike through **Turkey** towards **Persia** or the **Suez Canal**. The authorities in **London** thought that the loss of **Greece** would weaken the naval position but would not be altogether disastrous. If the thrust was south-east through **Turkey** the situation would be more serious, for such an advance could jeopardise the security of the whole **Middle East**. Efforts were therefore made to persuade **Turkey** that her best policy would be to declare war as soon as German troops entered **Bulgaria**. And Mr Churchill pointed out to General Wavell the importance of the attack which he was soon to open in North Africa. If successful it might determine the attitude of **Yugoslavia** and **Turkey**. ‘One may indeed see possibility of centre of gravity in **Middle East** shifting suddenly from Egypt to the **Balkans**, and from **Cairo** to Constantinople.’ ¹

Within a few weeks Churchill could be more definite, for in **Albania** the Greeks had continued to advance and in North **Africa** there had been the victory at **Sidi Barrani**, the capture of **Bardia** and, on 6 January 1941, the encirclement of **Tobruk**.

The destruction of the Italian forces in **Cyrenaica** and the capture of **Benghazi** were now the natural objectives. But it was quite possible that Wavell might have to be satisfied with the capture of **Tobruk**, for once the western flank of Egypt was secure he would have to send some support to **Greece**. If her forces failed to capture the port of Valona she could possibly be ‘in the mood for a separate peace with **Italy**.’ ² If they were successful it might be possible, with **Yugoslavia** and **Turkey**, to

form a **Balkan** front, and that in turn might persuade **Russia** to challenge German aggression in the **Balkans**. In any case **Hitler**, whether he liked it or not, must be preparing to support **Italy**. In fact the Foreign Office already had a mass of information all pointing to a German attack upon **Greece**.

So on 8 January the Defence Committee of Cabinet agreed that, from 'the political point of view', all possible support must be given to **Greece**. To support this decision there was a telegram from General Smuts suggesting that **Tobruk** should be the 'terminus' of the advance and that a large part of the desert force be transferred to meet a German attack in the **Balkans**. He did wonder

¹ Churchill, Vol. II, p. 483.

² Ibid., Vol. III, p. 9.

if **Germany** could 'afford to set the **Balkans** ablaze with **Russia** an incalculable factor and **Turkey** hostile'; he even thought that her troop movements might be an effort to 'lure the British forces from **Britain**.' But, not having all the facts, he left the subject for the General Staff to consider.

The commanders-in-chief in the **Middle East** were now warned that the Germans would probably advance through **Bulgaria** towards **Salonika**. Once **Tobruk** was taken all other plans would have to be subordinated to the needs of **Greece**. General Wavell and Air Chief Marshal Longmore were therefore ordered to visit **Athens** to discuss the situation with Generals Metaxas and Papagos (Commander-in-Chief Greek Army). These firm instructions seem to have surprised the commanders-in-chief. Wavell suggested that the German concentrations in **Rumania** were possibly designed to weaken the offensive in North Africa. He asked the Chiefs of Staff to 'consider most urgently whether enemy's move is not bluff.' In any case, if it was genuine, little could be

done to prevent it.

On 10 January Mr Churchill replied—and wasted no words when he did so. The available information contradicted any possibility of ‘bluff’; a thrust towards **Salonika** would endanger the Greek divisions in **Albania**. ‘But is this not also the very thing the Germans ought to do to harm us most? Destruction of **Greece** will eclipse victories you have gained in **Libya**, and may affect decisively Turkish attitude, especially if we have shown ourselves callous of fate of allies. You must now therefore conform your plans to larger interests at stake.

‘Nothing must hamper capture of **Tobruk**, but thereafter all operations in **Libya** are subordinated to aiding **Greece**, and all preparations must be made from the receipt of this telegram for the immediate succour of **Greece** up to the limits prescribed.... We expect and require prompt and active compliance with our decisions, for which we bear full responsibility.’¹

There was no suggestion, as yet, of a complete army being sent to **Greece** but the offer would at least cover a squadron of infantry tanks, a regiment of cruiser tanks, ten regiments of artillery and five squadrons of aircraft. And Wavell when he met the Greeks was to stress the fact that if the British had not arrived before the Germans entered **Bulgaria** the move would almost certainly be too late.

The decision having been made, Churchill sent an explanation to General Smuts. ‘Naturally Wavell and Co. heart-set on chase but Wavell is going ... to concert reinforcements with Greeks.

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, pp. 16–17.

Cannot guarantee success; can only make what we think best arrangements. Weather, mountains, Danube crossing, fortified Greek-Bulgarian frontier, all helpful factors. **Turkey, Yugoslavia, Russia**, all perhaps favourably influenced by evidences of British support of **Greece**.’

The discussion in **Athens** on 14–15 January found the Greeks reluctant to accept this offer, Metaxas pointing out that the problem of south-east **Europe** could not be ‘faced with the forces now at their disposal in the Near [Middle] East.’² He thought that ten³ divisions was the minimum aid required to give a reasonable chance of withstanding a German attack. The assistance suggested by Wavell would be strong enough to provoke German intervention but not powerful enough to offer any hopes of successful resistance. He insisted that it should be despatched only if the Germans entered **Bulgaria**, but he emphasised, once again, that **Greece** would not conclude a separate peace with the Axis powers. Hoping that a British success in **Libya** and a Greek success in **Albania** would release sufficient troops for the defence of **Salonika**, Metaxas also suggested that a joint plan be drawn up and ‘steps taken by **Greece** to carry out the necessary preparations for the arrival of British troops.’⁴

This refusal was accepted with relief by General Wavell, who returned to **Cairo** and cabled a report to **London**. The suggested plan had been ‘a dangerous half measure.’ Now that the *Luftwaffe* was operating in the **Mediterranean** the first task for the British was to secure **Benghazi** and make Egypt safe from an attack. No promise should be made to send troops to **Greece**, but he did think that preparations should be made for a force to defend **Salonika**.

The Chiefs of Staff accordingly modified their policy for the near future. On 17 January Wavell was warned that British aid must not be forced upon the Greeks. If the Germans made a serious attack upon **Greece** the British, at this stage, ‘could do no more than impose a small delay to their occupation of the country.’⁵ In any case it was quite possible that British troops would be sent not to **Greece** but to **Turkey**. Their final conclusions, issued on 21 January, were that **Benghazi** should be captured, that three

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 19.

² Rich, Ch. 1, p. 35. para. 64.

³ Memorandum, Koryzis-Eden, 22 Feb 1941, recapitulating the attitude of Metaxas on 15 January. Cf. 'History of the Preliminaries to **Greece**', reproducing telegram in COS 12 (O), 15 Jan 1941, where nine divisions is the number stated.

⁴ These staff talks began immediately and continued until 13 February 1941. See Rich, Ch. 1, p. 35, para. 64.

⁵ COS 14 (O), 18 Jan 1941.

'Glen' ships should be sent to assist in the capture of Rhodes ¹ and that a reserve of four divisions should be assembled for operations in **Greece** or **Turkey** within the next two months. The commanders-in-chief agreed, and the desert forces which had just captured **Tobruk** continued on their way to encircle the Italian army in **Cyrenaica**.

At the moment any information coming in to the Foreign Office suggested that it was **Turkey** and not **Greece** which would have to be supported. The efforts of the British Liaison Mission ² to persuade the Turks to accept British assistance, especially air forces, had not, however, been successful. Lacking the resources with which to challenge the Axis powers, they preferred to remain neutral. This forced Mr Churchill to send a personal appeal to the President of **Turkey** and to advise the Chiefs of Staff that 'the Greek-Turkish situation must have priority.' ³ As explained to General Wavell by the Chiefs of Staff, it was more important than the capture of **Benghazi**.

Within a week this was all too clear. On 6 February, three weeks earlier than expected, **Benghazi** was occupied and the desert flank, the peg on which all else hung, had become relatively secure. ⁴ On 8 February **M. Koryzis**, the new President ⁵ of **Greece**, sent a note to the British Government reaffirming the determination of his country to

resist any German attack but repeating the statement by Metaxas that no British force should be sent into **Macedonia** until the Germans had entered **Bulgaria**. Staff talks ⁶ had, however, been taking place for the last three weeks, so Koryzis now suggested that the size and composition of the British expeditionary force be determined. It would then be possible to decide whether the combined Greek and British forces could resist German aggression and encourage the support of **Turkey** and **Yugoslavia**. If they could not, then the premature appearance of insufficient forces in **Macedonia** 'would do no more than provoke German intervention.'

The British Government was thus forced to make a major decision—should the desert army which had just taken **Benghazi** complete the conquest of North Africa or should the force be halted in preparation for a move to the **Balkans**? In the words

¹ The attempt was never made but the 'Glen' liners converted for use as assault landing ships were afterwards used in the evacuation of **W Force** from **Greece**.

² The report from this mission was received in **London** on 22 January.

³ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 32.

⁴ The landing of the ***Afrika Korps*** at **Tripoli** had begun early in February but Wavell received no definite reports until mid-February.

⁵ General Metaxas had died on 29 January 1941.

⁶ Defence plans had been discussed; No. 27 Military Mission had studied harbours and possible bases (not the **Salonika** area).

of Mr Churchill: 'Now the moment had come when the irrevocable decision must be taken whether or not to send the Army of the Nile to Greece. This grave step was required not only to help Greece in her peril and torment but to form against the impending German attack a Balkan Front comprising Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey, with effects upon Soviet Russia which could not be measured by us.... It was not what we could send ourselves that could decide the Balkan issue. Our limited hope was to stir and organise united action. If at the wave of our wand Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey would all act together, it seemed to us that Hitler might either let the Balkans off for the time being or become so heavily engaged with our combined forces as to create a major front in that theatre. We did not then know that he was already deeply set upon his gigantic invasion of Russia. If we had we should have felt more confidence in the success of our policy. We should have seen that he risked falling between two stools, and might easily impair his supreme undertaking for the sake of a Balkan preliminary. This is what actually happened, but we could not know at the time.' ¹

All that the Government could appreciate was the importance of arresting the movement of German forces into south and south-east Europe. It had been its desire ever since Churchill had made his report ² to Cabinet during the first week of the war, and now that Benghazi had been captured the Government was prepared to send all possible support to Greece. So on 12 February Wavell was told that his forces in Cyrenaica must be halted; his major effort had now to be in the Balkans; and if that was a failure Crete must be held 'at all costs.' The Middle East Command was to initiate such preparations as it could, including the assembly of ships for the movement of the maximum forces at the earliest possible moment. To obtain concerted action Mr Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, and Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, were to visit Cairo, study the situation and then go to Athens and Ankara.

These instructions forced General Wavell to search his rather bare cupboard to find a force to go to Greece. The best that he could do was

to suggest a brigade from **2 Armoured Division**, the **Polish Brigade**,³ **6** and **7 Australian Divisions** and the **New Zealand Division**.

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, pp. 83–4.

² See p. 86.

³ Because of Rommel's counter-attack in North Africa the **Polish Brigade** and **7 Australian Division** were not sent to **Greece**.

On 17 February he told **General Freyberg** that his division would be the advanced guard of the Imperial Force.¹ The troops would disembark at either **Piræus** or **Volos**, move up to a defence line in **Macedonia**, and, when the Australians arrived, withdraw into Force Reserve for movement north to hold the **Monastir Gap** or possibly the front north-east of **Salonika**. And there the subject was closed, leaving **Freyberg** in a very difficult position. As he afterwards said: 'The decision to go to **Greece** was taken on a level we could not touch.... I was never in a position to make a well informed and responsible judgment.... Wavell told me our Government agreed.... Wavell had established the right to deal direct² with the **New Zealand Government**, without letting me know what was happening.... We should have cabled them.'³

With General Blamey it was somewhat different. On being given his instructions on 18 February he suggested that the matter should be referred to the Australian Government. He was told that the proposal had already been discussed with Mr Menzies, the Prime Minister of **Australia**, who had just passed through **Cairo** on his way to **London**. General Wavell had found him 'very ready to agree to what he suggested.'⁴

By then Mr Eden and General Dill were on their way to **Cairo**. The Foreign Secretary had to gather together all the threads and propose the best solution to the problems of the **Middle East**. His principal task was

to initiate any action he thought fit for the swift relief of **Greece**, with whom it was 'our duty to fight, and, if need be, suffer.' His second task was to make both **Turkey** and **Yugoslavia** 'fight at the same time or do the best they can.' And his third was to arrange for military aid to **Turkey** since her interests were, in the long run, 'no less important to us than those of **Greece**.' ⁵ General Dill, as Chief of the General Staff, would give advice on military affairs and, if there was any difference of opinion, his views were to be given to the Government.

The delegates arrived in **Cairo** on 19 February where, almost immediately, Eden received a telegram from Churchill in which there was a rather cautious note: 'Do not consider yourselves obligated to a Greek enterprise if in your hearts you feel it will only be another Norwegian fiasco. If no good plan can be made please say so. But of course you know how valuable success would be.' ⁶

¹ See also F. L. W. Wood, *The New Zealand People at War*, Chap. 14.

² As **Freyberg** thought. Actually Eden - Churchill - Dominions Office-New Zealand Government was the line of communication.

³ **Freyberg** to **Kippenberger**, 10 Sep 1956.

⁴ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

The replies from Eden on 20–21 February stated that after discussions in **Cairo** it had been decided to offer the fullest possible support to **Greece**. The argument was that if **Greece** was not successfully supported **Turkey** might not fight—and that would mean that **Yugoslavia**

might not fight. That being so, the only way to prevent **Hitler's** gradual absorption of these states and to build up a **Balkan** front was to help **Greece** with everything that was available. They all admitted that it was 'a gamble to send forces to the mainland of **Europe** to fight Germans at this time. No one can give a guarantee of success, but when we discussed this matter in **London** we were prepared to run the risk of failure, thinking it better to suffer with the Greeks than to make no attempt to help them. That is the conviction we all hold here. Moreover, though the campaign is a daring venture, we are not without hope that it might succeed to the extent of halting the Germans before they overrun all **Greece.**' ¹ They might have to play the cards of their 'evacuation strong suit' ² but the stakes were big, so big that intervention was safer than inactivity.

The forces available were not strong; at the very most **LUSTRE Force** ³ would have no more than three and a half divisions; and they could not all be deployed until mid-June. Moreover, there would be problems of supply which would tax the resources of the **Navy** and a weakness of air cover that could never be remedied. However, as a guarantee to the Greeks that **Britain** was sending her best, the commander would be General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, who had a high reputation after his recent successes in **Libya**. The Australian Corps and the New Zealand Division would both of them 'be led by strong personalities who are also senior soldiers.'

Mr Eden, Generals Dill and Wavell, Air Chief Marshal Longmore and Captain R. M. Dick, RN, representing Admiral Cunningham, then went on 22 February to **Athens** to confer with the King of **Greece**, **M. Koryzis** and General Papagos. Before the conference the King insisted that Mr Eden should receive from **M. Koryzis** an appreciation ⁴ of the situation as it appeared to the Greeks. **Greece** was determined to continue the war against **Italy** and, if attacked by **Germany**, to resist with or without British assistance. But the Government was not certain that the available Greek and British forces were sufficiently strong to resist the

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 65.

² Long, p. 9; Rich, Vol. I, p. 45. Cf. Churchill, Vol. III, p. 65, which says 'to play trump cards'.

³ The code-name given to the proposed British force during the negotiations.

⁴ Two documents had been given to the British Minister earlier in the month; the third is summarised in Churchill, Vol. III, p. 66.

enemy. The British were prepared to despatch two or three divisions but the minimum support, according to the late General Metaxas, must be ten divisions. Otherwise the appearance of a small British force would precipitate German intervention and discourage **Turkey** and **Yugoslavia**. Such being the case, no British troops should be despatched until **Germany** had entered **Bulgaria**. The problem for the conference was 'what reinforcements should be sent to enable the Greek Army to resist the German.'

In the discussions which followed the British explained that their victories in North Africa had made it possible for them to offer considerable assistance. ¹ The Greeks welcomed the suggestion but emphasised the danger of precipitating German action and the need for the Allies to calculate whether their combined forces were, because of the dubious attitude of **Turkey** and **Yugoslavia**, strong enough to make an effective resistance. General Papagos explained that the choice of a defence line depended upon the policy of **Yugoslavia**. If she joined the Allies they could hold either the Metaxas or Strimon line, both ² of which covered the port of **Salonika**. If she did not the left flank would be open for a German advance through **Bulgaria** and down the Vardar valley.

The political appreciation at this stage was that **Yugoslavia** could not be counted on as an ally. Prince Paul had already declined a suggested visit by Mr Eden and the antagonism between Serb and Croat was such that if war was declared the latter would possibly support **Germany**. The only safe policy was to assume that **Yugoslavia** would remain neutral.

In that case the best policy for the Allies was to hold the Aliakmon line, which lay to the west of **Salonika** along the mountain barrier of **Mount Olympus - Veroia - Edhessa - Kaimakchalan**. The main danger would be the exposure of the left flank should the Germans invade **Yugoslavia** and approach the **Monastir Gap**, a natural avenue into northern **Greece**. There was every chance, however, that **Yugoslavia** would resist such violation of her neutrality so the military experts, remembering Serbian resistance in 1914–18 and the mountainous nature of the country, decided that the flank was reasonably safe. If the Germans did break through there would always be time to establish a line from Mount Olympus through **Servia** to the Greek positions in the west.

¹ Major-General Sir F. de Guingand, *Operation Victory*, p. 57, gives an account of how this assistance was described in the best possible light.

² Metaxas line: forts from Mt Beles near the junction of the Greek, Yugoslav and Bulgarian frontiers to the **Rupel Pass** and east to the Mesta River—in all 100 miles. Strimon line: from Mt Beles to the **Rupel Pass** and south down the Strimon River to the sea—in all 70 miles.

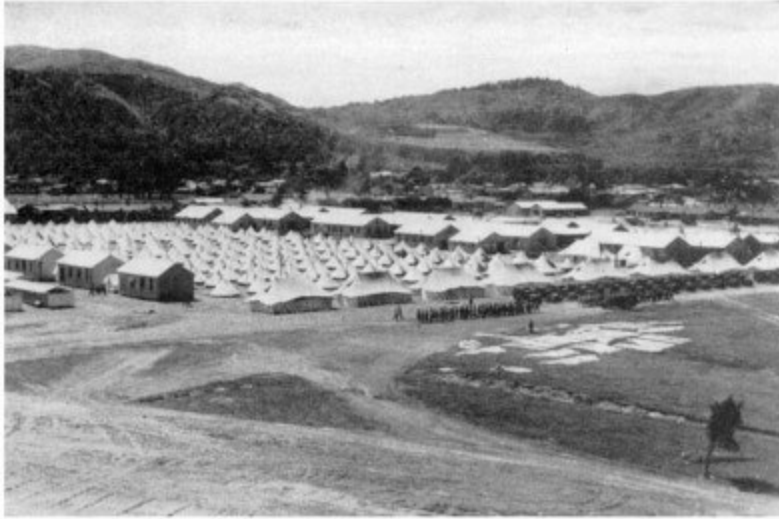
Time was all important, but General Papagos had already asked the **Greek Government** for permission to withdraw ¹ his troops as soon as possible from **Thrace** and **Macedonia**. Once they had reached the Aliakmon line he could adjust his right flank in **Albania** and prepare for defensive action. The line was naturally strong and the thirty-five Greek

battalions, with the British forces, as offered, should be able to hold it. Papagos had already said that he thought that eight divisions with one in reserve was the requirement and Dill agreed. Wavell and Dill now thought that the plan offered a reasonable chance of success but they were worried about the inevitable air superiority of the Germans, although quite definite that the movement of Imperial troops from Egypt to Greece should begin immediately.

The question then arose as to when the Greeks in Thrace and eastern Macedonia should be recalled to the Aliakmon line. From a military point of view their immediate withdrawal was the only answer. On the other hand, it might be a political error to abandon Macedonia because all contact would be lost with the Turks and Salonika would be left undefended. As the main supply line to Yugoslavia would be from that port, its Government might then decide not to join the Allies. Nevertheless the outcome of the discussion, so far as the British understood it, was that the Greeks would immediately withdraw. And because of the doubtful attitude of some Yugoslav ministers there was to be no official statement to that country, otherwise the Germans might be told of the British expedition. Mr Eden was to approach Prince Paul, the Regent of Yugoslavia, pointing out the likelihood of Germany attacking Greece and asking him for his opinion on the subject of Yugoslav intervention. Before the conference broke up in the early hours of 23 February, M. Koryzis, at Eden's request, stated formally that the Greek Government accepted with deep gratitude the offer of assistance made by the British Government, and that the military plan was completely acceptable.

The authorities in London accepted these decisions. The Chiefs of Staff saw the possibilities of the campaign in the Balkans but thought that the risks were great. On the other hand, the desertion of a minor ally already fighting one enemy and determined to fight another would be a major political error. Moreover it was a sound move to have the Germans fight for what they wanted rather than to grant them a victory by default. In the War Cabinet Churchill pointed out that the men on

the spot had not been forced to support the venture. Eden had already been warned ² that there



Trentham Camp, 1939

Trentham Camp, 1939



First Echelon recruits at Hopu Hopu receive their web equipment

First Echelon recruits at Hopu Hopu receive their web equipment



Visitors' Day, Trentham, before the departure of the
First Echelon in January 1940

Visitors' Day, Trentham, before the departure of the First Echelon in January 1940

Second Echelon farewell parade at the Auckland Domain, April 1940.
A small Navy contingent sailed with this echelon



**Second Echelon farewell parade at the Auckland Domain, April 1940.
A small Navy contingent sailed with this echelon**



First Echelon troops on board the *Dunera*, Lyttelton, 5 January 1940

First Echelon troops on board the *Dunera*, Lyttelton, 5 January 1940

Railway Construction sappers board the *Andes* at Lyttelton, 1 May 1940

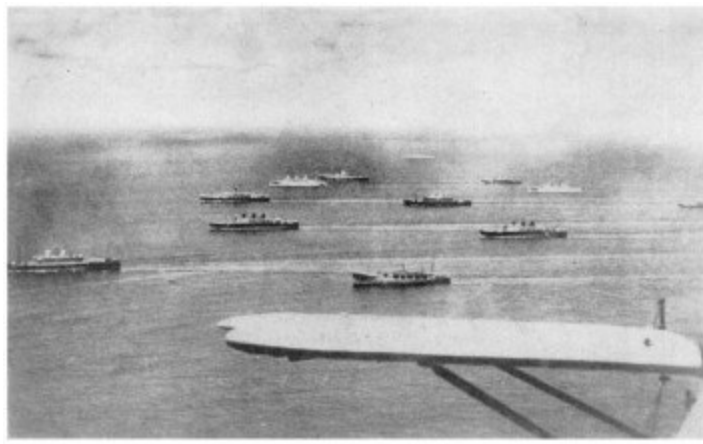


Railway Construction sappers board the *Andes* at Lyttelton, 1 May 1940



Submarine lookout,
Mauretania

Submarine lookout, *Mauretania*



First Echelon and AIF convoy in the Indian Ocean, January 1940. The ships are: Nearest line (from left), *Otranto*, *Sobieski*; second line, *Strathnaver*, *Strathaird*; third line, *Orion*, *Orford*, *Dunera*; fourth line, *Empress of Canada*, *Empress of Japan*; fifth line, *Orcades*, *Rangitata*; at rear, an escorting cruiser

First Echelon and AIF convoy in the Indian Ocean, January 1940. The ships are: Nearest line (from left), *Otranto*, *Sobieski*; second line, *Strathnaver*, *Strathaird*; third line, *Orion*, *Orford*, *Dunera*; fourth line, *Empress of Canada*, *Empress of Japan*; fifth line, *Orcades*, *Rangitata*; at rear, an escorting cruiser



Mess-deck

Mess-deck



General Freyberg welcomes the First Echelon at Port Tewfik, 12 February 1940. General Wavell (carrying cane) is behind him and to his left are Mr Anthony Eden and Sir Miles Lampson

General Freyberg welcomes the First Echelon at Port Tewfik, 12 February 1940. General Wavell (carrying cane) is behind him and to his left are Mr Anthony Eden and Sir Miles Lampson



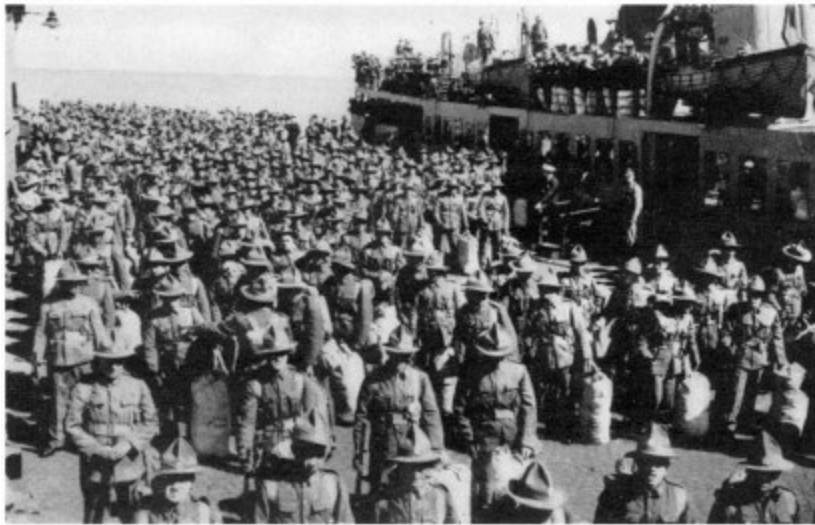
20 Battalion arrives at Maadi Camp, February 1940

20 Battalion arrives at Maadi Camp, February 1940



Battalion lines, Maadi

Battalion lines, Maadi



Second Echelon disembarks at Gourock

Second Echelon disembarks at Gourock



Mytchett Place, Headquarters of 2 NZEF in the United Kingdom

Mytchett Place, Headquarters of 2 NZEF in the United Kingdom



Mr Churchill takes the salute from D Company of the Maori Battalion

Mr Churchill takes the salute from D Company of the [Maori Battalion](#)



Loading spruce. New Zealand Forestry Group in the United Kingdom

Loading spruce. New Zealand Forestry Group in the [United Kingdom](#)

¹ In future discussions General Papagos stated that it had been permission to withdraw his troops 'if necessary'. See [p. 105](#).

² Churchill, Vol. III, p. 63.

was not to be another Norwegian fiasco; General Wavell had naturally been eager to complete his North African campaign; and General Dill had, hitherto, been doubtful about the chances of a Greek campaign. Now they were all in favour of it. Churchill himself thought that the relief of [Greece](#) might convince [Yugoslavia](#) and [Turkey](#) and

impress the **United States**. In the discussion which followed this statement Mr Menzies, who was present, wanted reassurances about shipping and equipment. The venture had to be more than a forlorn hope; he had to be able to tell his cabinet in **Australia** that there was a reasonable chance of success. Churchill thought that the expedition could hardly be avoided. 'If we should be pressed back, our troops might well have to be evacuated', ¹ but the majority of them could be brought back to Egypt. The only serious loss could be one of equipment. In the end the War Cabinet gave its unanimous approval, with one important reservation: the Governments of **Australia** and New Zealand had to agree before their divisions were employed. Churchill on 24 February advised Eden that there was 'No need anticipate difficulties in either quarter.' 'Therefore', he continued, 'while being under no illusions, we all send you the order "Full steam ahead".'² But this was perhaps too confident a statement.

¹ British Historical Section, Cabinet Office.

² Churchill, Vol. III, p. 69.

TO GREECE

NEW ZEALAND DIVISION TO GO TO GREECE

New Zealand Division to go to Greece

In New Zealand there was a certain amount of confusion. On three previous occasions ³ **General Freyberg** had mentioned **Greece** as a possible theatre of war, and on 23 February, the very day General Wavell returned from **Athens**, he had, without mentioning **Greece**, given the **New Zealand Government** 'an appreciation of the situation and our likely role and fitness for it.' As soon as 5 Brigade had arrived from **Britain**, been refitted and hardened up, the Division could take the field. 'Therefore, I feel 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 confidence.' ⁴ The result was that when a cable ⁵ was received from **Britain** on 26 February stating that the despatch of the Division was an essential part of the plan to assist **Greece** and that Mr Menzies was advising his Government to permit the use of the Australian divisions, the Government naturally assumed that **General Freyberg** had been consulted; in fact his words, 'full operational role', were repeated in the cable which gave its consent. Had the Government not made this assumption it would certainly have asked for his opinion, and had there been no reference to the acceptance of the plan by Menzies a more detailed statement would have been asked for.

After the receipt of another cable ¹ with reasons and plans for the expedition the Government was more critical and less confident. Thinking that the force was small and anxious about its chances of being reinforced, it asked if these features had been given full consideration. It was told that the plan was not without hazard, but the general tone of the reply ² was surprisingly confident, even though it was known that **Greece** was now feeling the strain ³ and that **Turkey** had not changed her attitude. Indeed, Mr Eden, who had been in Ankara with

General Dill during 26 February–1 March, had already informed ⁴ Mr Churchill that, unless the Turks were deliberately attacked, their inadequate resources would force them to remain neutral.

³ Conferences with Major-General Sir John Duigan, Chief of the New Zealand General Staff, who was in the **Middle East**, 28 November. Cable to Minister of Defence, 2 Dec 1940, *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 200–1. Cable to Chief of the General Staff, 13 Jan 1941, *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 204–5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 206–7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 241–2.

¹ *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 242–3. Cables No. 335 and 336 had been sent to New Zealand on 25 February but the consent of the **New Zealand Government** had been given before the more detailed statement of No. 335 had been received.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 245–6, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to the Prime Minister of New Zealand, 2 Mar 1941.

³ See p. 151.

⁴ Churchill, Vol. III, pp. 85–6: Eden to Prime Minister, 28 Feb 1941.

TO GREECE

1 AUSTRALIAN CORPS TO GO TO GREECE

1 Australian Corps to go to Greece

The Government in **Australia** had more detailed information than the Government of New Zealand. On 25 February Mr Menzies sent a cable to Mr Fadden, the acting Prime Minister, with a summary of the plan and the note that most people were in favour of it, the argument being that Wavell and Dill were 'able and cautious' men whose advice must be respected.⁵ Churchill had also said that if **Japan** attacked them 'adequate naval reinforcements would at once be dispatched to Australian waters.'⁶ This was a statement which Menzies was inclined to discount. The risks were very apparent and a forced evacuation was quite possible, but his final opinion was that **Australia** should agree to the expedition.

The War Cabinet in **Australia**, though worried about the size of the expedition and the problem of supplies, eventually agreed that 6 and 7 Divisions should go to **Greece**. But it made one interesting proviso—its consent was 'conditional on plans having been completed beforehand to ensure that evacuation, if necessitated, will be successfully undertaken and that shipping and other essential services will be available for this purpose if required.'¹

⁵ Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 15.

⁶ Ibid.

¹ See *Documents*, Vol. I, p. 243, note 1, cable of 28 February sent to the British Government, repeated to the **New Zealand Government**.

TO GREECE

THE MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE ALIAKMON LINE

The Misunderstanding about the Aliakmon Line

At this point the difficulties of Mr Eden were increasing. Having failed to persuade the Turks to enter the war he had now, on the instructions of Mr Churchill, to make his main appeal to **Yugoslavia**. An attack by her upon the Italian flank in **Albania** would produce a 'disaster of the first magnitude, possibly decisive on whole **Balkan** situation.' If **Turkey** declared war at the same time the effect would be incalculable. 'I am absolutely ready,' said Churchill, 'to go in on a serious hazard if there is reasonable chance of success.'² At the moment, however, it was very difficult to decide just what these chances were. The Government of **Yugoslavia** had long since declared that any aggression would be resisted and that the movement of foreign troops through the country would be refused. But it had never declared what its attitude would be if the German forces in **Rumania** began to cross the Danube into **Bulgaria**.

On 1 March this question was answered. The crossing began, there were no protests from **Yugoslavia** and the Germans were free to approach the borders of **Greece**. Next day Mr Eden and General Dill returned from **Turkey** to **Athens**, where the British Minister from Belgrade was waiting to explain the hesitant attitude of **Yugoslavia**. He was sent back to the Regent with a verbal message pointing out that as **Britain** had decided to help **Greece** it was also possible for her to assist **Yugoslavia**.

Still more disturbing was the fact that General Papagos had not withdrawn to the Aliakmon line any units from **Thrace**, eastern **Macedonia** and **Albania**. After the conference at **Athens** the British had thought that they and the Greeks would immediately begin to occupy the Aliakmon line without waiting to hear what **Yugoslavia** had decided to do. General Papagos, however, had understood³ that he could wait until a reply was received from **Yugoslavia**. He had done so but it was now too late. For should he order a withdrawal there would be despair

² Churchill, Vol. III, p. 86.

³ General Alexander Papagos, *The German Attack on Greece*: 'It is natural that General Papagos should desire it to be quite clear to British readers that the said change of plan was due not to any obscure political reasons, but to the delay in receiving an answer from the Yugoslav Government clarifying their intentions.' (from Preface) Eden, Dill and Wavell had understood that there would be an immediate withdrawal; de Guingand, who was present, thought that the move would be made 'as early as possible' (*Operation Victory*, p. 58). For the political problem see p. 115, note 1.

people of **Macedonia** and every chance of his troops being caught during the withdrawal. He therefore proposed to hold the Metaxas line and not to withdraw any of his divisions from **Albania**. The British on their arrival would have to move up piecemeal to the Macedonian front. This was so entirely different from the original plan, and strategically so unsound, that Sir John Dill would not accept it. General Wavell was called over from Egypt and a series of anxious discussions then took place.

To General Dill it appeared hopeless for the Greeks to attempt to hold the Metaxas line with three divisions when they knew that it would require nine. Nor was he any more confident when Papagos thought that four divisions might be found for the task. The transportation of British troops to **Salonika** would be too dangerous; the three or four Greek divisions would be overwhelmed before the British arrived; and even if they did get there in time resistance would be hopeless. So, while admitting the difficulty of the situation and praising Greek valour in **Albania**, he stated, very firmly, that he was not going to throw away the only British reserves in the **Middle East**.

If risks had to be taken in the **Balkans** they would be taken along the

Aliakmon line. Nine divisions had once been considered necessary for its defence but he was now prepared to carry on if three Greek divisions could be assembled to support the three and a half British divisions. The transfer of troops from **Albania** would have simplified the task, but Papagos thought that the morale of his force would decline and that any move would be too late. The national pride of the Greeks was such that they would not withdraw from the Italian front, even if it meant a stab in the back from the Germans. In his opinion the situation had no solution, for **Germany** had the initiative in the **Balkans**. Nevertheless he offered to provide seven or eight battalions for the Aliakmon line, but Dill and Eden, remembering the original plan for thirty-five Greek battalions,¹ wanted a better military proposition.

After further study another conference was held, this time in the presence of the King, for the attitude of Papagos had hitherto been ‘unaccommodating and defeatist.’² Dill once again stated that he would not send troops to the Metaxas line; the Aliakmon line gave the Germans another 100 miles to advance, was difficult to approach, was shorter and naturally stronger. Papagos still did not favour any dispersal of his forces, but he finally offered to provide three divisions and seven battalions—in all about twenty battalions.

¹ See p. 102.

² *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 247–9: Eden and Dill to Churchill, 4 Mar 1941.

The British now had to make one of three decisions. They could accept the Greek plans for the Metaxas line, which were hopeless; they could leave the Greeks to their fate, but that was politically impossible and dangerous to the safety of the **Royal Air Force** and those supporting units already in **Greece**; or they could defend the Aliakmon line, supported by twenty Greek battalions instead of the thirty-five they had been promised at the earlier conference. With considerable misgivings,

the third plan was accepted shortly after midnight on 4 March. The command and organisation of the Aliakmon line was to be the responsibility of General Wilson; the overall command was to be retained by General Papagos who, once the decision had been made, was confident and determined.

So far as the army was concerned the Aliakmon line was not altogether hopeless; at the worst there could always be a fighting withdrawal ‘through country eminently suitable for rearguard action.’¹ No reference was made to the other services, but Admiral Cunningham that same day informed the Admiralty that the only possible decision had been made, although it meant that great risks would have to be taken. The convoys and the ports of disembarkation would have insufficient air cover; one convoy would be sent to **Malta but, apart from that, the fleet for the next two months or more would be concerned with the movement of troops to **Greece**. This meant less protection for the supply line to **Tobruk** and no attempt, as yet, to capture the island of Rhodes.**

The expedition was thus hazardous from every angle, but those on the spot were certain that the abandonment of **Greece would in the end be more costly. A year later, after the fall of **Singapore** and when the occupation of **Java** by an Australian corps was suggested, Wavell informed Churchill that had the terms been reasonable he would have unhesitatingly recommended that risks be taken as he had done in the matter of aid to **Greece**. ‘I thought then that we had good fighting chance of checking German invasion, and in spite of results still consider risk was justifiable.’² Nearly ten years later he was of the same opinion and explained the situation as he saw it: ‘I think that it may have been psychological and political considerations that tilted the balance in the end over the military dangers. To have withdrawn at this stage, on grounds which could not have been made public, would have been disastrous to our reputation in the U.S.A. and with other neutrals, would have ended all hope of **Yugoslavia** joining the Allies and would have shaken our ally **Turkey**. Our plan had been endorsed³**

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 88.

² Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 125.

³ This was hardly correct. See pp. 103– 5.

by the Dominion Governments whose troops were involved. And there were political difficulties in any reversal of plan; the troops were on the move and a change would have caused confusion.

‘I was sure at the time, and I am sure still, in spite of what resulted, that the decision we took at our Embassy in **Athens** in that first week in March, 1941, was the only one consistent with the political requirements of the moment, with military strategy and with our national honour.’ ¹

The authorities outside the **Mediterranean** area had still to be convinced of the wisdom of this decision. The Chiefs of Staff in **Britain** pointed out that the hazards of the operation had increased considerably. The Greeks were too heavily involved in **Albania**; the force might not be able to reach the Aliakmon line in time to halt the German advance. The **Navy** was worried about the safety of convoys, the air defences of the ports in **Greece** and the blocking of the **Suez Canal** by mines.

The two Dominions concerned, particularly **Australia**, were not happy about the decision. With Mr Menzies attending the War Cabinet, the Australian Government was receiving a detailed analysis of the situation in the **Middle East**. The British raid on the island of Castelorizzo had failed, German aircraft were operating over **Cyrenaica** and German armour was said to be in **Tripoli**. The Australians felt it necessary to point out that, although **Australia** was not afraid to take ‘a great risk in a good cause’, ² the delegation had signed a written agreement with the Greeks; they doubted whether a minister not

authorised by them could make a binding agreement ³ which substantially modified a proposal already accepted by them.

This forced Mr Churchill to reconsider the whole enterprise. On 6 March he sent Mr Eden, who was now back in **Cairo**, a most prudent despatch with the warning that he might expect an adverse decision from the War Cabinet. The delegation had done its best to create a **Balkan** front and, having failed, must leave the Greeks free to make their own choice. In any case the loss of **Greece** and the **Balkans** was not a major catastrophe so long as **Turkey** remained genuinely neutral. Moreover, grave Imperial issues were 'raised by committing New Zealand and Australian troops to an enterprise which, as you say, has become even more hazardous.'⁴ The Dominions had been given all the information

¹ Field Marshal Earl Wavell, 'The British Expedition to Greece, 1941', *Army Quarterly*, January 1950.

² Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 17.

³ The accepted version in French of the discussions of 4 March was signed by Generals Dill and Papagos.

⁴ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 90.

but he could not forecast their agreement to the operation, as now proposed.

In the next cable Eden received an admirable analysis ¹ of the problem that had been prepared by the Chiefs of Staff in **Britain**. The attitude of General Papagos was bound to react unfavourably upon the fighting spirit of his army and the failure of the Greeks to withdraw to the Aliakmon line was most serious. The British had expected that some Greek troops could be transferred from **Albania** to this line, but Papagos

now reported that his army was 'exhausted and outnumbered.' With enemy aircraft operating from the island of Rhodes, some of the **Royal Air Force** would have to be used to protect the sea route to **Greece**. The mining of the **Suez Canal** was another serious problem. And if the German thrust from **Bulgaria** was unchecked it was possible that the attack might open with two German divisions attacking one armoured brigade and one New Zealand infantry brigade. Their conclusion was that the hazards of the enterprise had considerably increased. But, in spite of their misgivings, they felt that they were not as yet in a position to question 'the military advice of those on the spot' who had described the position as not by any means hopeless.

These two statements, the first from the once hopeful Mr Churchill and the second from the ever cautious Chiefs of Staff, mark a new stage in the negotiations. In future there were to be fewer references to a **Balkan** front and more emphasis upon the moral aspects of the problem.

The British Minister in **Athens**, Sir Michael Palairret, was most distressed by the suggestion that the agreement between **Britain** and **Greece** need not be kept. The Greeks had decided to fight **Germany**, alone if necessary. 'We shall be pilloried ² by the Greeks and the world in general as going back on our word.' The King of **Greece** was still confident of Allied success and General Wilson had been greatly encouraged by the marked improvement in the attitude of General Papagos, who was now most hopeful and anxious to co-operate.

At 5 p.m. on 6 March Mr Eden, Sir John Dill and the three commanders-in-chief met in **Cairo**. They were worried by the evident reluctance of the Dominions to tempt fortune with their divisions, but General Wavell reassured them. He had not yet seen General Blamey but he had informed **General Freyberg** of the new situation. ' **General Freyberg** though he realises the added difficulties was not

¹ *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 253–5.

² Churchill, Vol. III, p. 91: Palairot to Eden, 6 Mar 1941. The same point was made by General Smuts at the conference held that night in **Cairo**.

perturbed and was prepared to go ahead. ¹ He had made no suggestion that his Government might be unwilling to go ahead.’ ²

In any case, the Foreign Secretary and the three commanders-in-chief still thought that an expedition must be sent to **Greece**. Eden argued that a withdrawal at this stage would remove, once and for all, any chance of bringing **Yugoslavia** into the war and might have incalculable effects upon the Turkish position. Air Chief Marshal Longmore doubted whether the **Royal Air Force** could hold the *Luftwaffe* in **Greece** but he still thought that assistance must be given. Admiral Cunningham was anxious about air attacks on his convoys at sea and in the ports of disembarkation, but he too agreed that the decision they had made in **Athens** was the only possible one.

The military authorities were more confident. Sir John Dill admitted that the situation was worse than they had originally considered it but thought that if the British reached the Aliakmon line before the Germans there was a reasonable chance of holding it. Should the Germans get there first, he thought it possible to withdraw without great loss. General Wavell was convinced that the expedition should be sent; success offered such chances that the course of the war could be changed. ³ Eden then suggested that a resolute note be sent to Churchill stating that they thought, in spite of the risks involved, that their decision to send the expedition had been correct.

Their firm attitude impressed Mr Churchill but he made it quite clear that he was not going to support any hazardous scheme just because it was his moral duty to do so. They were reminded ⁴ that the Greeks must not be urged against their better judgment to a hopeless struggle. If, however, they were determined, aided or unaided, to fight it out to the end, then their ordeal must be shared. He also pointed out, obviously

because of Mr Menzies' suggestions, that the Dominions had to be told that the hazardous venture was being undertaken, not because of the agreement signed in **Athens** but because the commanders saw 'a reasonable fighting chance.' So far there had been too many references to moral obligations; a precise military appreciation was now indispensable.

In **Cairo** at 10.15 p.m. the subject was again discussed, this time in the presence of General Smuts, an international statesman who had long since learnt that military and political action must go

¹ Actually **Freyberg** had been informed rather than consulted, had told Wavell that he had no illusions about the difficulties ahead, and had been told once again that the New Zealand Government was prepared to engage in the venture.—**Freyberg to Kippenberger**, 10 Sep 1956.

² British Historical Section, Cabinet Office.

³ Major-General R. J. Collins, *Lord Wavell*, Appx VII: The Pros and Cons of Intervention in **Greece**.

⁴ Churchill, Vol. III, pp. 92–3.

hand in hand. He realised that everything depended upon the divisions' being able to reach the Aliakmon line in time to halt the German advanced guard but, like the others, he failed to see how the expedition could now be held back. The Greeks had been so successful in **Albania** that any failure to assist them would leave **Britain** discredited before the world. Some might argue that a German victory in the **Balkans** would almost wreck the cause but, in his opinion, the damage would be greater if **Britain** stood aside and did nothing. Nevertheless, as **Australia** and New Zealand were to provide the greater proportion of the fighting troops, there could be repercussions if things went wrong.

General Wavell then reported that since the meeting at 5 p.m. he had seen General Blamey and told him of the increased risks which might now have to be taken. He, like **General Freyberg**,¹ had not expressed any wish to withdraw. At the suggestion of Mr Eden a note about the determined attitude of the Dominion commanders was immediately cabled to the War Office. The discussion then swung back to the ground already covered that afternoon, with Eden, Dill and Wavell still convinced that the expedition should be sent, and Longmore and Cunningham certain that they should not turn back but doubtful of their ability to give adequate support.

On 7 March the decisions of this second conference were received by Churchill. The envoys had seen no reason to reverse their previous judgment. They pointed out that there had been no attempt to persuade **Greece** 'against her better judgment.' **Britain** had already been giving assistance to **Greece**. Squadrons of the **Royal Air Force**, ground defences and anti-aircraft guns had been in action there for several months. 'Collapse of **Greece** without further effort on our part to save her by intervention on land, after the Libyan victories had, as all the world knows, made forces available, would be the greatest calamity. **Yugoslavia** would then certainly be lost; nor can we feel confident that even **Turkey** would have the strength to remain steadfast if the Germans and Italians were established in **Greece** without effort on our part to resist them. No doubt our prestige will suffer if we are ignominiously ejected, but in any event to have fought and suffered in **Greece** would be less damaging to us than to have left **Greece** to her fate....' They trusted that the Dominion troops could be used in **Greece** and emphasised the fact that, if the **Royal Air Force** was adequately reinforced, 'most of the dangers and difficulties of this enterprise will disappear.'²

¹ See p. 99.

² Churchill, Vol. III, pp. 93–4.

In this statement Mr Churchill was not given that military appreciation which he had described as indispensable. Time may have prevented its preparation but, even so, it was most unusual for the War Cabinet to be left without a joint and detailed appreciation from the three services. Nor was anything said about a **Balkan** front. Emphasis was now given to the moral and political importance of a campaign in **Greece**. In fact Admiral Cunningham, when writing of this last meeting, has said: 'I gave it as my opinion that though politically we were correct, I had grave uncertainty of its military expedience. Dill himself had doubts, and said to me after the meeting: "Well, we've taken the decision. I'm not at all sure it's the right one."' ¹ Their unanimity is therefore all the more remarkable. Apparently they realised that every opportunity must be seized, that the **Balkans** could not be abandoned without a struggle, that the good will of **Russia** and the **United States** was worth cultivating, ² and that there was always the **Navy** and the chances of a successful evacuation.

The urgency of the situation had, as it happened, forced the War Cabinet to make its decision before the receipt of this last appreciation. With Menzies present, it had decided that because of the consistent attitude of General Dill, the commanders-in-chief on the spot, and 'the commanders of the forces to be employed', ³ Eden should be authorised to proceed with the operation, the War Cabinet having accepted full responsibility and arranged to communicate with the Dominion Governments. In one way this was a surprising decision for no detailed military appreciation had been received. On the other hand, the definite attitude of the once hesitant commanders-in-chief was very convincing and the Government itself was anxious to support **Greece** if it was administratively possible.

¹ Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 315.

² **Hitler** had similar views. Dönitz afterwards reported that U-boat activities off **Halifax** were restricted because **Hitler** wished 'to

avoid every possibility of friction with the **United States.**' N.D., Vol. XIII, p. 265. See also 'The Führer Conferences on Naval Affairs, 1939–1945', published in *Brassey's Naval Annual*, 1948, and F. H. Hinsley, *Hitler's Strategy*.

³ Two cables had been sent to **London** on 6 March, one giving the decision of the first conference (see p. 110), the other stating that Generals Blamey and **Freyberg** had been consulted (see p. 111).

TO GREECE

THE NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENT MAKES ITS DECISION

The New Zealand Government Makes its Decision

The exact orders for the departure of the first flight of LUSTRE Force cannot be found but the fact is that the ships were already on their way to Greece. ⁴ They had left Alexandria at noon on 6 March, before Mr Eden and his advisers held their afternoon and evening conferences, one day before the War Cabinet in Britain finally decided to send the expedition, and two days before the New Zealand Government agreed to the proposed course of action.

The reply from New Zealand was sent on 9 March after a long sitting of the War Cabinet in Wellington. The Government realised that the operation, always dangerous and speculative, was now distinctly hazardous. The margin was narrow and the risks considerable, so, remembering Norway and Dunkirk, the Government prepared its own analysis ¹ of the problem. In the first paragraph it was clearly stated that the formation of a Balkan front was no longer the dominant reason for the expedition: 'There seems to be little prospect of Yugoslav or Turkish assistance, and consequently the possibility of such assistance should be disregarded entirely as a factor in the consideration of the matter.'

After listing all possible dangers, the Government made this memorable statement:

Nevertheless, having regard to all these considerations, His Majesty's Government in New Zealand look upon the first and last of the alternatives set out in the fifth paragraph of the Secretary of State's telegram as completely unacceptable. In particular they cannot contemplate the possibility of abandoning the Greeks to their fate, especially after the heroic resistance with which they have met the Italian invader. To do so would be to destroy the moral basis of our cause

and invite results greater in their potential damage to us than any failure of the contemplated operation. Therefore, in the circumstances, they find themselves in agreement with the conclusions arrived at by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, as now approved by His Majesty's Government in the **United Kingdom**—a decision which they consider to have been correct in a most difficult situation.

His Majesty's Government in New Zealand, with a full knowledge of the hazards to be run, align themselves with His Majesty's Government in the **United Kingdom** and agree with the course now proposed. They are confident that New Zealand troops in this dangerous enterprise will worthily uphold their traditions and indeed would be the first to approve of the decision now taken. ²

There had been no differences of opinion. 'This conclusion was arrived at unanimously by all the members of the War Cabinet and all the members of the ordinary Cabinet and was approved as the only possible course in the difficult circumstances by the Leader of the Opposition, ³ who was specially consulted on the matter by myself.' ⁴

It could be suggested that the Government had not been fully briefed, that it had attached too much weight to the opinion of Mr Menzies, that it had received no report from **General Freyberg**. And it is certainly true that after the campaign Mr Fraser reminded **General Freyberg** that he should have warned the Government that the expedition, so far as he understood it, had no reasonable chance of success. The Government may then have sought further assurances from **Britain**, but it is doubtful if its decision would have been any different. For time was pressing and it was determined not to do anything that might appear to be a moral failure.

⁴ This refers to troops. Supplies and motor transport had been in earlier convoys. For most units, transport was at **Piraeus** when the troop disembarked.

¹ ***Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 257–8.**

² ***Ibid.*, p. 258.**

³ **Mr S. G. Holland.**

⁴ ***Evening Post*, 24 Apr 1941: Mr Peter Fraser.**

TO GREECE

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT MAKES ITS DECISION

The Australian Government Makes its Decision

The Australian Government was not so easily convinced. From London Mr Menzies had been giving it a more critical appreciation of the situation than the one the **New Zealand Government** had been building up for itself from the official despatches. Impressed by the statement that the commanders-in-chief still supported the proposal and that Generals Blamey and **Freyberg** were agreeable, it had, however, agreed ¹ that **1 Australian Corps** should be despatched to the **Balkans**. No sooner had it made this decision than it learnt that General Blamey had always been doubtful about the operation.

On 5 March in a letter to Mr Menzies he had said: 'The plan is, of course, what I feared: piecemeal dispatch to **Europe**.' The next day he was called before Generals Dill and Wavell to be told that the enterprise was now more dangerous. ² Somewhat perturbed, he asked his own Government for its permission to submit his views before the corps was sent to **Greece**. With his request went an explanatory note: 'You will appreciate that as I am under operational direction of C in C **Middle East** I cannot do so without direction from you.' The Government was unprepared for this. Thinking that he was agreeable, it had already committed the Australian Imperial Force. It now learnt that in his opinion the Allies would have to face a stronger army supported by a superior air force. If they wished to reinforce **Greece** in order to impress **Turkey** and **Yugoslavia**, they had to remember that a defeat and an evacuation, if that should occur, would impress neither the **Balkan** states nor **Japan**. In his opinion the operation was 'extremely hazardous.' Mr Menzies was therefore asked to state this view in **London** and to get some assurances that the operation had a reasonable chance of success. The answers he received were little different from those in the final cables, Mr Churchill referring to 'the overwhelming moral and

political repercussions of abandoning **Greece**' and saying little about the possibility of a **Balkan** front.

¹ The Australian War Cabinet concurred on 28 February and again on 11 March.

² See p. 111.

TO GREECE

INCREASED CONFIDENCE AFTER THE COUP D'ÉTAT IN YUGOSLAVIA

Increased Confidence after the coup d'état in Yugoslavia

As it was, the Allied cause was not without its supporters in the **Balkans**. As a result of an appeal to the Prince Regent, a Yugoslav staff officer visited **Athens** on 8 March to make inquiries about the assistance his Government might expect if it were to oppose **Germany**. At Cyprus on 18 March Mr Eden persuaded the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs that **Turkey** must ask **Yugoslavia** to arrange for common action should **Salonika** be attacked through **Bulgaria**. The barometer certainly dropped on 25 March when **Yugoslavia** officially adhered to the Tripartite Pact,¹ but it rose sharply on 27 March when a group of army officers overthrew the Cvetkovic Government and released the national enthusiasm of the Serbs.

For Mr Churchill this was proof that his policy could get results. **Hitler** had been flouted; it might still be possible to prevent the **Balkan** states falling piecemeal into **Hitler's** power. The President of **Turkey** was told that 'Surely now is the time to make a common front which **Germany** will hardly dare assail.' At Malta, Mr Eden, then on his way home, received a similar cable and returned to **Athens**. From there Sir John Dill on 31 March–1 April visited Belgrade and met, secretly, certain members of the new Yugoslav Government. In their opinion **Hitler**, who was furious at the *coup d'état*, would attack **Yugoslavia** and not **Greece**; in fact they wanted to know if **Greece** would support **Yugoslavia** should **Germany** attack her. Nevertheless, they were not prepared to take the initiative against **Germany**, for the Croats and Slovenes were restless and the country not yet prepared for war. Their policy was to gain time for mobilisation and concentration. Had they known that **Hitler** had already decided to destroy **Yugoslavia** 'militarily and as a national unit', they might have been more willing to take immediate action. However, they did agree to staff talks,² which took place at **Florina** on 3 April, to

arrange for common action should **Germany** attack **Yugoslavia** and **Salonika**.

¹ When the news was received in **Athens** the Greeks at last wished to withdraw the three divisions from **Macedonia** to the **Aliakmon** line; plans were drawn up and General Wilson agreed to provide fifty motor vehicles. But the King of **Greece** thought that the move would be 'politically very difficult'. So on the night of 26 March the move was postponed.—British Historical Section, Cabinet Office.

² See pp. 131– 2.

TO GREECE

MR CHURCHILL AND THE DOMINIONS

Mr Churchill and the Dominions

The importance of the *coup d'état* in **Yugoslavia** can also be noted in Churchill's subsequent correspondence with the Dominions. On 30 March, with his gift for lifting a subject out of the commonplace, he summed up the situation for Mr Fadden, the acting Prime Minister of **Australia**:

When a month ago we decided upon sending an army to **Greece** it looked rather a blank military adventure dictated by *noblesse oblige*. Thursday's events in Belgrade show far-reaching effects of this and other measures we have taken on whole **Balkan** situation. German plans have been upset, and we may cherish renewed hopes of forming a **Balkan** front with **Turkey**, comprising about seventy Allied divisions from the four Powers concerned. This is of course by no means certain yet. But even now it puts LUSTRE in its true setting, not as an isolated military act, but as a prime mover in a large design. Whatever the outcome may be, everything that has happened since our decision was taken justifies it. Delay will also enable full concentration to be made on the Greek front instead of piecemeal engagement of our forces. Result unknowable, but prize has increased and risks have somewhat lessened. ¹

To reduce these risks still further the Dominion Governments had already made it quite clear that, if the expedition was fraught with so many dangers, every care must be taken to prevent a complete disaster. On 24 March Admiral Cunningham was advised that both Dominions when agreeing to the plan had asked that arrangements be prepared for the possible evacuation of the troops. To reassure them he was asked to state that he already had such preparations under way. His reply was that ever since the decision to despatch the expedition the problem of evacuation had never been far from his thoughts. ² The final arrangements must depend upon the course of the campaign, the place

of evacuation and type of ship that could be used, but he did guarantee that everything possible would be done ‘to withdraw the Dominion Troops with British.’

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 152.

² Cunningham, p. 315. ‘Indeed, when the decision to send troops was finally taken, we started at once to think of how we should bring them out.’

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 7 – W FORCE MOVES INTO POSITION

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TO GREECE

MOVEMENT OF NEW ZEALAND DIVISION TO GREECE

Movement of New Zealand Division to Greece

ON 24 February **General Freyberg** told his brigadiers that the Division was going to **Greece**. They were not free, even among themselves, to discuss the expedition and the movement in its initial stages would have the appearance of a divisional exercise. The unit commanders in their turn were warned that they would soon be moving to 'a theatre of war'. Intense activity immediately developed in the Base Ordnance Depot where clothes and equipment, including topees, ¹ were issued and about the camps where equipment was checked and packed into the motor vehicles. The observant rank and file, who had been told nothing, thereupon decided that they were about to move overseas. Some oracles predicted a landing along the North African coast, others thought that the Division would be attacking an island base in the **Aegean Sea** and quite a number concluded that the objective would be on the mainland of **Greece**.

The movement orders which were issued by GHQ Middle East ² on 28 February bypassed HQ **2 NZEF** and went straight to individual units. The Division was not going to embark as a complete formation. **LUSTRE Force** had been divided into flights within which units, and sometimes sections of units, would travel with similar detachments from the British and Australian divisions. On 3 March the assembly commenced, the first flight moving by road or by rail to **Amiriya**, a dusty transit camp on a windswept stretch of desert some 12 miles west of **Alexandria**. The loaded vehicles were then taken to the docks, the troops waiting until they received their final orders to move.

In the **Suez** area the movement was reversed. On 3 March, the day that the advance parties moved out from **Helwan** to **Amiriya**,

¹ These unmanageable helmets were issued in anticipation of the **Balkan** summer, and to avoid possible problems of supply. They were handed back to Ordnance soon after arrival in **Greece**.

² This system of direct control by GHQ Middle East may have been a measure of security but it led to protests from **General Freyberg**. On his behalf Brigadier Stevens pointed out to the Higher Command that **2 NZEF** was 'a National Army with its own training and administrative establishments.' He hoped that in future any details of a basic plan would be 'forwarded to this office at the outset.' In the case of the fourth and later flights, HQ **2 NZEF** instructed all units that they were to come under command of GHQ **Middle East**.

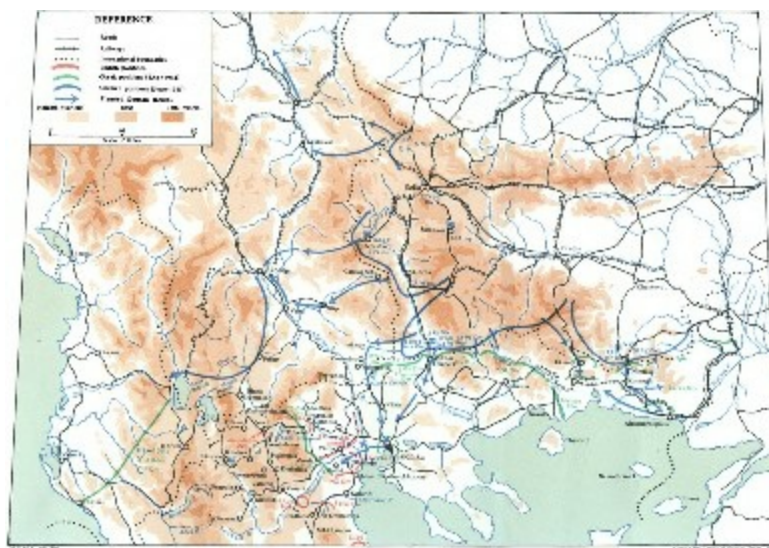
the convoy with the **Second Echelon** was steaming in from **Britain**. While the first arrivals, 23 Battalion and 28 (Maori) Battalion, were disembarking and entraining for **Helwan Camp**, **General Freyberg** and Brigadier Hargest were warning the senior officers of the echelon that they must prepare for yet another move. They had only three weeks within which to reorganise the brigade and receive new equipment, to complete their training schemes and harden the men after nine weeks at sea.

General Freyberg had then to make his own preparations for the move. On 5 March he called at GHQ Middle East to meet General Wavell after his return from the conference ¹ in **Athens**. The Commander-in-Chief gave him an outline of the defence plan but no estimate of the possible strength of **LUSTRE Force**. **General Freyberg** understood, nevertheless, that twenty-three squadrons of the **Royal Air Force** would be in support. This was encouraging information though he still had no illusions about the difficulties that **LUSTRE Force** would have to face.

The immediate problem was that of transport. The Naval Command had always realised that the Eastern Mediterranean could never be safe from the Axis forces that were operating from southern **Italy** and the islands of the **Aegean Sea**. But they had not expected the acute shortage

of transport vessels which had developed in February after the enemy, by dropping magnetic mines, had closed the **Suez Canal** to all shipping. On 3 March, the day the Canal was to have been clear, more mines had been dropped, with the result that half the freighters and all the transports had to remain at the southern entrance. It was just possible for separate convoys of freighters to have the motor vehicles and heavy equipment in **Greece** before the arrival of the flight, but the troops, if they were to arrive on time, had to travel in the cruisers *York*, *Bonaventure*, *Orion*, *Ajax Breconshire*, and the motor vessel *Ulster Prince*.

The first flight embarked about midday on 6 March.² In the notes which he made as they pulled out **General Freyberg** recalled the spring of 1915, when he had been with the Royal Naval Division before the landing on **Gallipoli**. After twenty-six years he was back with his own countrymen, better qualified to appreciate them and convinced that they had ‘a higher standard of talent and character’ than the men of any other unit he had known. If the troops in the first flight had known that he was of this opinion they would probably have been surprised but they would not have wasted any



The German Plan of Attack and Allied Positions on 5 April 1941

¹ See pp. 106– 8.

² HMS *York* (Maj-Gen Freyberg, Col K. L. Stewart, GSO I, Lt-Col W. G. Gentry, AA & QMG, Lt J. C. White, Personal Assistant to the GOC); advance parties from 4 and 6 Brigades were in HMS *York* and HMS *Bonaventure*; HMS *Orion* (C and D Coys 18 Bn); HMS *Ajax* (HQ, A and B Coys 18 Bn); HMS *Breconshire* (6 Fd Coy); MV *Ulster Prince* (1 Gen Hosp).

time debating the subject. They were too busy enjoying the hospitality of the **Navy** and speculating as to their possible destination.

The General had hoped to reveal the secret to his senior officers in Egypt but events had moved so rapidly that he had to be satisfied with a Special Order of the Day ¹ which was to be opened after the ships were out of the harbour. Through it the men were told that they would be fighting in **Greece** against Germans; they were warned that they must steel themselves to accept the noise and confusion of modern warfare; and they were reminded that the honour of the Dominion was in their hands.

On 7 March, less than twenty-four hours after it had left Alexandria, the flight had its first sight of **Greece**. In the clear air of that spring morning the troops could see the outlying islands, and beyond them the harmonious outline of the still distant mainland. As the hours passed the sea changed to darker shades of blue, the white villages along the rocky coastline became more distinct and the isle of Salamis rose up above the waters to the west. At last about midday the cruisers swung east beyond a rocky promontory and the troops about the crowded decks had their first view of the harbour, the factories and the modern buildings of **Piræus**. **Athens**, only three miles inland, lay behind the slight rise to the north-east.

The Greeks, who had not expected the arrival of a British expeditionary force, were wildly excited. The seamen on the ships within the arbour cheered as the cruisers drew in; the excited people along the highway and the crowds in the streets of **Athens** gave the flight —and all successive flights—a spontaneous and tumultuous welcome as they went

through to the staging areas outside the city. **Kifisia**, a summer resort on the lower slopes of Mount Pendelicon, had been reserved for the artillery regiments, the **Army Service Corps** companies and 1 General Hospital. The infantry brigades, each in its turn, encamped in the pine plantations on the western slopes of Mount Hymettus.

In the city itself Advanced 2 Echelon and Base Pay Office were established; Major **Rattray**,² the New Zealand Liaison Officer, went to Headquarters, British Troops in **Greece**. At Voula, a pleasant resort along the coast to the south-east of **Piræus**, the Reinforcement Camp was set up.

The other flights did not always find it so easy to reach this new world. Some units enjoyed the comparative luxury of travel on the fast cruisers, but others had to endure a slow crossing on small cargo

¹ In some cases this order was not read to the troops; several commanding officers did not receive it until after their arrival in **Greece**.

² **Maj N. A. Rattray**, MBE, m.i.d., Croix de Guerre (Fr); MLC; Waimate; born Dunedin, 7 Nov 1896; soldier and farmer; Royal Irish Fusiliers (Capt) 1915–22 (twice wounded); p.w. 25 Apr 1941.

vessels that came through after the Canal was cleared. They had not been built for such a ferry service. 'Deck dwellers peered down the hatch at men, mess gear and packs pressed together in the holds, where past passengers—sheep—had left their trademark, and where the smelly air was hot and stifling.'¹ The messing facilities were naturally very limited, the ships' galleys providing tea and the men eating tinned meat and army biscuits.

Moreover, at this season of the year there was always the danger of severe storms. On 13–15 March the transit camp at **Amiriya** had heavy rain and then a memorable sandstorm that stopped the movement of all

vehicles on the desert road between **Cairo** and Alexandria. The second flight ² which was at sea during 9–17 March consequently saw the **Mediterranean** at its worst. The Greek steamer *Hellas*, with Headquarters Divisional Engineers on board, was hove-to for a day; the *Ionia*, with 4 Field Ambulance and 19 Army Troops Company, had her holds battened down and was hard put to it to make two knots; the *Marit Maersk* with 19 Battalion drifted out of the convoy, was hove-to south of **Crete** and forced to put in to **Suda Bay** before she could go on to **Piræus**.

With the third ³ and fourth flights which were crossing during 17–22 March it was not the weather but the *Luftwaffe* that was dangerous. Dive-bombers came over on several occasions but caused no damage until 21 March, when the SS *Barpeta* had a near miss and a tanker was hit and had to be towed off to **Suda Bay**.

The fifth ⁴ flight with the much-travelled 5 Brigade crossed during 25–29 March, the period of the naval Battle of Matapan. On 27 March, when the convoy was south of **Crete**, the Admiral learnt that the Italian Navy was steaming into the **Aegean Sea**. The convoy was ordered to steam on as a decoy and, after nightfall, to reverse its course. Next day when the battle took place it was well out of the way, though the diversion meant another twelve hours at sea and an unexpected arrival at **Piræus** on the evening of 29 March. With no unit vehicles waiting for them, 23 and 28 (Maori) Battalions had to march the ten miles to **Hymettus Camp**; 21 Battalion went by train, 22 Battalion by motor transport.

¹ J. B. McKinney, *Medical Units of 2 NZEF in Middle East and Italy*, p. 65.

² HMS *York* (Div Pro Coy, 4 Fd Hyg Sec); HMS *Breconshire* (20 Bn); HMS *Chakla* (Sup Coln); SS *Korinthia* (HQ 4 Bde, Div Postal, Fd Pay); SS *Hellas* (HQ Div Engrs); SS *Ionia* (4 Fd Amb, 19 A Tps Coy); SS *Marit Maersk* (19 Bn).

³ HMS *Ajax* (24 Bn); HMS *Orion* (25 Bn); HMS *Breconshire* (5 Fd Pk Coy, 26 Bn); HMS *Gloucester* (27 MG Bn, Pet Coy); HMS *Chakla* (Div Sigs); HMAS *Perth* (CRA and BM Div Arty); SS *Hellas* (4 Fd Regt, Adv Pty Div Sigs); SS *Korinthia* (part Div HQ); SS *Ionia* (4 RMT Coy, 1 Fd Wkshops, Div Cav Regt); SS *Barpeta* (6 Fd Amb, HQ 6 Bde, HQ NZASC, part Div HQ, Fd Security Sec). No New Zealand units were with the fourth flight.

⁴ MV *Cameronia* (nurses 1 Gen Hosp, Comd 5 Bde and staff, 23 Bn, 28 (Maori) Bn, 5 and 6 Fd Regts); MV *Ulster Prince* (1 Svy Tp); SS *Ionia* (HQ 5 Bde, 21 Bn, 11 offrs 5 Fd Regt, Adv 2 Ech); SS *Hellas* (22 Bn); SS *Korintbia* (7 A-Tk Regt, 5 Fd Amb).

The major portion of the New Zealand Division was then in **Greece**. The only New Zealanders with the sixth flight on 1–3 April were 7 Field Company, the **Mobile Dental Unit** and a detachment from the **YMCA**. A seventh flight was at sea on 6 April when the German invasion began, but as chance would have it no New Zealanders had been detailed to go with it.

After that date it would have been foolish for General Wavell to send any other troops to the **Balkans**. The armies of **Yugoslavia** were disintegrating and it was doubtful if a solid front could be established. In North Africa the situation was even more disturbing. On 31 March Rommel had opened that spectacular counter offensive by which he was to recover **Cyrenaica**, surround **Tobruk** and threaten Egypt. Instead of sending 7 Australian Division and the Polish Brigade to **Greece**, Wavell retained them in Egypt and eventually sent them as reinforcements to **Tobruk**. The seventh flight was consequently the last to reach **Greece**. The transport vehicles of 10 Railway Construction Company had been shipped to **Greece**, but the personnel and a composite section from the Railway Operating Companies, who were to have sailed with an eighth flight, and 21 Mechanical Equipment Company which was to have moved with a ninth flight, never left Egypt.

TO GREECE

W FORCE MOVES INTO POSITION

W Force Moves into Position

At the **Athens** conference ¹ on 2–4 March the final arrangement was that three Greek divisions from the **Central Macedonian Army** would assemble with all possible speed and take over a sector of the **Aliakmon** line. The British, Australian and New Zealand troops of **LUSTRE Force**, henceforth to be known as **W Force**, would be sent north as rapidly as possible to take over the remainder of the line. All units, both Greek and British, would take their orders from General Wilson who, in turn, would be under General Papagos, Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces in **Greece**. For security reasons and because the Greeks did not wish to provoke the Germans, General Wilson was to remain incognito with the pseudonym of Mr Watt until the German attack was about to be launched.

After the conference General Wilson made a swift reconnaissance of the **Aliakmon** line, a natural but as yet unprepared defence system that extended from the Gulf of **Salonika** to the border of **Yugoslavia**. To approach it the Germans now moving into **Bulgaria** would have to break through the **Metaxas** line and cross the plain of **Macedonia**. Once they were past **Salonika** and over the **Vardar (Axios) River**, ² they had the choice of attacking several different gaps in the mountain ranges. South of **Mount Olympus** the
rail-

¹ See pp. 105– 8.

² This river is known in **Yugoslavia** as the **Vardar** and in **Greece** as the **Axios**.

and a third-class road turned west through the **Pinios Gorge** (the historic Vale of **Tempe**) to **Larisa**. Immediately north of the mountain a narrow but well formed road went through **Olympus Pass** to **Elasson**. South-west from **Veroia** the main highway went over the ranges to **Kozani**, and still farther north to the west of **Edhessa** a pass linked the **Salonika** area and the small plain about **Florina**.

As the forcing of any one of these passes would be long and costly, it was quite possible that the Germans might attempt to turn the left or northern end of the Aliakmon line by way of **Yugoslavia** and the **Monastir Gap**. Should **Yugoslavia** object to such movement across her territory she would almost certainly be invaded, and much would then depend upon her powers of resistance. If she was unable to halt a German thrust towards **Monastir** the Aliakmon line would have to be adjusted. Units would be withdrawn from **Edhessa** and **Veroia**, the **Mount Olympus** sector would be retained, and a new line established westwards from there to **Servia** and the Greek sector about **Grevena**. The highways which came south from **Florina** and **Kastoria** would thus be blocked.

To cover the concentration of **W Force**, Greek units would be sited on the three main routes: **19 (Motorised) Division** in the coastal sector, **12 Division** in **Veroia Pass** and **20 Division** in **Edhessa Pass**. In due time the **New Zealand Division**, with **19 (Motorised) Division** on its right flank, would, take over the coastal sector. Adjoining it to the west in the **Pierian Range** would be regiments from **12 Greek Division**. The defence of the **Veroia Gap** would be the responsibility of a brigade from **6 Australian Division**. The **Vermion Range**, the **Edhessa Pass** and the rugged **Kaimakchalan** sector on the border of **Yugoslavia** would be held by **20 Greek Division** and the remainder of **12 Greek Division**. On the **Macedonian Plain** to the east of **Edhessa** **1 Armoured Brigade** would hold the line of the **Axios River** in order to delay the enemy and cover the parties preparing demolitions.

While movement orders were being prepared, **General Freyberg**, with **Colonel Stewart**, went by air to **Larisa** and then motored to **Kozani**. From

there they went through the pass to **Veroia** and returned by way of **Katerini** and **Olympus Pass** to **Larisa** and, eventually, to **Athens**. The General was impressed by the commanders of the **Central Macedonian Army** but disturbed by the sight of 12 Greek Division moving into position: 'their first line transport was composed entirely of ox wagons and pack animals which of course could only travel a very limited distance in a day at a very slow speed—actually at a slower pace than troops could march.'¹

¹ **General Freyberg**, Report on the New Zealand Division in Greece, p. 7.

On 9 March he received his orders from **W Force** Headquarters. There had been some changes in the plan which had been drawn up at the conference in **Athens** on 2–4 March. In the southern sector the line had been swung north from **Mount Olympus** to include the great triangle of open ground between the mountain range and the **Aliakmon River**. The Division, less 5 Brigade as Corps Reserve behind **Veroia** Pass, would be responsible for the quadrilateral between Meliki, **Neon Elevtherokhorion**, **Katerini** and Mega Elevtherokhorion. The Greek divisions which were already in the sector would eventually be withdrawn, leaving the New Zealanders with a front of 15 miles: from the coast to the ridges of the Pierian Range immediately north of **Mount Olympus**. In the more level country adjoining the coast a deep anti-tank ditch was now being dug, but even with this barrier the defence of such an extended front was no ordinary task for two infantry brigades.

To make the situation still more difficult there were serious problems of time and transport. As a result of the dispersal of the units throughout the different flights, men who should have been among the first to reach **Katerini** were held back for days or even weeks. The GSO I and the AA & QMG had travelled with **General Freyberg** but the other members of his staff did not reach the area until 25 March, nearly a fortnight after the arrival of the advance party. The artillery units

required time for the preparation of their positions but they were among the last to move in, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, in particular, appearing only a few days before the German invasion. Once the units arrived in Greece the hastily organised base headquarters in Athens did its best to send them forward, but that was not always easy to organise. If the flights were delayed by bad weather or by the activities of enemy aircraft, there had to be alterations and adjustments in the movement orders that caused the greatest anxiety. Moreover, the staff had always to remember that between the transit camps about Athens and the divisional area at Katerini there were 250 miles of indifferent roadway and a succession of great mountain ranges.

TO GREECE

NEW ZEALAND DIVISION MOVES UP TO KATERINI

New Zealand Division Moves up to Katerini

The first group to move north—Lieutenant-Colonel G. H. Clifton, 6 Field Company and 2 Armoured Division Light Field Hygiene Section ¹—left **Hymettus** for **Katerini** on 11 March. At

¹ This section was soon afterwards withdrawn to join 1 Armoured Brigade; A Company 4 Field Ambulance, which had an ADS for that brigade in the **Veroia** area, returned to **Katerini**. The detachment of this company from the Division by the ADMS 80 Subarea was yet another example of that casual use of New Zealand units which always worried **General Freyberg**. See p. 137, note 1.

that date there was still rain, sleet and even snow, but for the majority of the Division who moved up towards the end of the month there was all the charm of the **Balkan** spring, the most enjoyable season of the year. In other months the countryside is dry and bare, for there are few grasses in **Greece**, but throughout March and April the fields are green with wheat or glowing with asphodels and poppies. In the forests and shaded clearings below the budding oaks and plane trees there are hyacinths, anemones, irises, crocuses, violets and Stars of Bethlehem. And on what would soon be dusty hillsides, pinks and champions, violas and saxifrages flourished in the shaded clefts and cracks.

On the route itself, whether the units went by road or by railway, there was a succession of plains or river valleys separated by ridges that were often high and always formidable. There was little choice of movement. The passes that had once been forced by Persians and Macedonians were the passes through which engineers had constructed railways and through which the battalions of the Commonwealth were to advance and retreat within the next few weeks.

The first stage of the journey was along the Sacred Way from **Athens** to **Eleusis** and then north through the hills to the defile of Citheron and the rolling vineyards outside the historic town of **Thebes**. Here the streets were pink with almond blossom and the famous springs gushed water at every fountain head. Beyond the town the road turned west and the company went up the valley to **Levadhia**, where it halted for the night. In the gorge beyond that picturesque town men had once consulted the oracle and found the waters of Memory and Forgetfulness.

Next day they moved on, with Mount Parnassus dominating the landscape to the west and great ridges rising to the north. In another age the company would then have turned north-east to the gap between the ridges and the sea which is known as the Pass of **Thermopylae**. At its narrowest it is wide enough for a road but for little else; there is the shingle beach on one side and 500-foot cliffs on the other. In its more open stretches the scene becomes enchanting: caiques may be anchored close in to the shore; the cliffs are still precipitous and the road is fringed with tall pine trees. In the open country to the north there is the village of **Molos**, the blue sulphurous stream from **Thermopylae**, the ancient aqueduct and then the silted plain with the Sperkhios River and the straight road to **Lamia**.

The railway and modern highway do not use the Pass of **Thermopylae**. They follow the more direct route to the north-west across the range by way of **Brallos Pass**. Those who went north by train remember the slow climb up the valley, the shaded gorges with stands of oak and pine, the succession of tunnels, the great bridge ¹ across the Asopos River and the run out across the Sperkhios valley to the west of **Lamia**, a town at the foot of the Othris Range. Sixth Field Company and other road parties recall the succession of curves by which they climbed above the gorges and the railway bridges. The hillsides were a mass of vegetation: myrtle, broom, thyme, Judas trees, wild olives and mountain oaks. The crest of the pass was in a world of pines and firs: ‘—it was a wonderful sight from the top with the road zig-zagging downhill in hair-pin bends, straightening out at the bottom and making a bee-line for

Lamia at the far side of the plain. At every village the people gave us a wonderful reception— threw flowers, waved and cheered, and whenever we stopped, brought us wine and eggs. All the schools were closed for the duration, and the children were there in hundreds.’²

The Othris Range beyond **Lamia** was the next obstacle. The railway line followed the north side of the Sperkhios valley and broke through the hills past Lake Xinias to the south-west corner of the plain of **Thessaly**. There was a second-class road running eastwards round the coast to **Volos**, a port from which a narrow-gauge railway and a bad road went through the hills to **Larisa**, the key town of **Thessaly**. The main highway ran between these two routes. Climbing north over scrub-covered hills, it reached the plain about Lake Xinias and then went over another ridge near **Dhomokos** to the undulating country about **Pharsala** and on to the plain of **Thessaly**, almost bare of trees, but well cultivated, studded with small villages and encircled by high mountains.

The chief town, **Larisa**, was not altogether at its best, having been shaken by an earthquake³ only a few days before and bombed on several occasions by the Italians, but it was obviously the key town of central **Greece**. The railway turned north-east to the Pinios Gorge, the **Platamon** tunnel and **Salonika**; to the north through **Elasson**, **Kozani** and **Florina** ran the highway to **Yugoslavia**; and north-westwards, by way of **Trikkala** and **Kalabaka**, was the road to **Albania**. The company kept to the highway, crossing the Pinios and Titarisos rivers and spending the night at **Tirnavos**. On 13 March, a cold day with some swirling snow, they went through the hills to another, but much smaller, plain on the northern edge of which was **Elasson**, a market town remembered for its Turkish minarets. North and across the valley, beyond the monastery with the golden dome, was the narrow pass leading to the bridge

¹ See p. 472.

² Capt M. S. Carrie, Adjutant NZE, extracts from personal diary.

beside the village of **Elevtherokhorion**. Beyond it there was yet another plain across which the highway continued north to **Yugoslavia** and a secondary road branched north-east to **Olympus Pass** and **Salonika**.

The route for 6 Field Company lay across the plain and up through the forested foothills to the crest of the pass. Mount **Olympus** was now to the south of them, white with snow and often obscured by clouds. Below them at the head of the gorge was the village of **Ay Dhimitrios**, where No. 1 Section remained to improve the road. In the next ten miles the forest changed imperceptibly from fir to pine, to oaks and beeches, to plane trees and finally to the shrubs of the foothills. Here No. 3 Section was left to ease corners, construct passing bays and generally improve the surface of the road which the engineers thought 'wasn't so bad, ... the main jobs were widening a few of the hair-pin bends and some of the culverts, but it was a pretty tricky road much like some of the back-country roads in New Zealand, and a big change from Egypt.' ¹

Company Headquarters and No. 2 Section then continued on their way across some 12 miles of undulating country on which shepherds watched flocks of long-tailed sheep and farmers ploughed the open fields for crops of maize and tobacco. A straight stretch of road lined with poplar trees took them into **Katerini**, a flourishing country town with a market square, a railway station and public gardens. The engineers, and for that matter the whole Division, had not yet been issued with bivouac tents so they were billeted ² in houses and public buildings. In this case it was only for two days, the men finding it much more convenient to be back at the base of the pass, where they worked until their services were required after the arrival of 4 and 6 Brigades.

The next unit to leave **Athens** was 18 Battalion. The road party with the transport vehicles left on 12 March, followed the route of the engineers and reached **Katerini** the following evening. But it was

different with the main body of the battalion: the rifle companies and the Bren-carrier platoon. They started the fashion for the majority of the Division and went up by train, leaving **Athens** on 13 March and reaching **Katerini** twenty-two hours later.

The journey was one that no soldier ever forgot. Sometimes there were old-fashioned carriages, but for the most part the troops were in goods wagons, horse vans and cattle trucks. 'Dry rations, tins of bully beef and stew and some bread were carried on the

¹ M. S. Carrie, diary.

² No troops were billeted after 15 April. The prices for a room in a village had not to exceed 18s. 3d., in a town 18s. 9d., a month. The bills were paid direct to the householders by the unit pay officers.

train. Tea was made with the aid of primus stoves, and luxuries like eggs and fresh Greek bread, brown and nutritious, could be purchased at some of the wayside stations.' ¹ The route across the succession of plains and valleys had been much the same as that of the highway but in the mountain sectors there were pronounced differences. Instead of windswept passes and great panoramas there were precipitous cliffs, heavily timbered gorges, the Asopos bridge, the charming Vale of **Tempe** and the coastal strip between the **Platamon** tunnel and **Katerini**, with the sea on one side and the timbered ridges of **Mount Olympus** on the other.

In **Katerini** the battalion spent several days waiting for instructions. The companies marched and trained; the transport platoon shifted road metal for the engineers; and in the evenings the rank and file enjoyed the hospitality of the township, sipping ouzo, a close relative of vodka, and sampling such wines as krassi and mavrodaphne.

By this time **General Freyberg**, having returned through the now

snow-covered passes, was discussing with the Greek commanders the boundaries of the divisional sector in the Aliakmon line and studying with Colonel Stewart the defence positions for 4 Brigade. The final decision was that the brigade should move beyond **Katerini** and fill half the gap between 19 Greek Motorised Division on the coast and 12 Greek Division in the mountains; 6 Brigade when it arrived would go to the west of 4 Brigade and take over the rest of the sector. In other words, the brigades would share a front of 12,000 yards, much of it along low ridges studded with oak saplings.

For 18 Battalion this meant the end of its pleasant sojourn in **Katerini**. On 18 March it moved out, A and C Companies to cover the demolition parties in **Olympus Pass**, Battalion Headquarters and the other companies to Mikri Milia, a village in the open country between **Katerini** and the **Aliakmon River**. As the other battalions had already left **Athens**, they appeared shortly afterwards and went straight to their respective areas. Twentieth Battalion, which arrived on 19–20 March, had to prepare positions at **Riakia**, a village three to four miles west of 18 Battalion. On 20–21 March 19 Battalion, as brigade reserve, arrived to assist the other units and to replace the companies which 18 Battalion had sent to the pass.

Brigade Headquarters was at **Palionellini**, where the supporting units were now assembling. No. 1 Section 6 Field Company, which had been brought down from **Olympus Pass** on 17 March, was assisting in the preparation of roads and defensive positions. Fourth

¹ Draft narrative 18 Battalion, pp. 51–2.

Field Ambulance, which had reached **Katerini** on 18 March, had, before the week was over, an Advanced Dressing Station burrowed out of a ridge to the north of the village and its Main Dressing Station to the west of **Katerini** in the village of **Kalokhori**, where there were already Headquarters New Zealand Division and the office of the Assistant Director of Medical Services (Colonel Kenrick). Fourth Field Hygiene

Section which arrived on 20 March was established beside the Main Dressing Station. As malaria was prevalent in summer the unit, in addition to checking the water supply and the sanitary arrangements, had to drain pools and ponds and oil all standing water in which mosquitoes might breed.

TO GREECE

THE MONASTIR GAP

The Monastir Gap

There was one serious weakness in this Aliakmon line; it could be turned from **Bulgaria** by a force which did not directly attack **Greece**. By driving hard across south-east **Yugoslavia** the Germans could reach **Monastir** and then thrust south across the border of **Greece** to **Florina**, to **Kozani** and to **Larisa**. However, this danger had been accepted in the hope that either the neutrality of the Yugoslavs would be respected or that they would prevent access to **Greece** by force of arms. Should the Germans overrun **Yugoslavia**, it was Papagos's intention to withdraw his Greek armies in **Albania** to link with the left flank of **W Force**.¹

Arrangements² had been made for a special reconnaissance squadron to operate in such forward areas as the **Monastir Gap** and to provide communications direct to Headquarters **W Force**. But this was not sufficient; there had to be a defence force to hold the range which overlooked the southern edge of the **Florina** area.

On 17 March Brigadier R. Charrington, the commander of 1 Armoured Brigade, was warned that the Germans, if they reached the **Monastir Gap**, could turn the north flank of the Aliakmon line. In view of this threat the cruiser tanks of 3 Royal Tank Regiment which were then on their way up from **Athens** were not detrained on the eastern side of the Aliakmon line; they were sent north towards **Salonika** and then back through the **Edhessa** Gap to be the nucleus of a force which would assemble about **Amindaion**, a small town just south-east of **Florina**. The other regiments remained in Macedonia but they had to be prepared to close the **Monastir Gap**. If the Germans came across **Macedonia** to the Aliakmon line, 1 Armoured Brigade would not withdraw southwards 'over lovely A/T positions'³ to the coastal sector held by the New Zealand Division. It would pull back through the **Edhessa** and **Veroia** gaps

¹ See p. 102.

² **W Force** Operation Instruction No. 1, 10 March.

³ Charrington to Wilson, 18 March.

and become part of the force that was now assembling about **Amindaion**.

On 20 March General Wilson was still apprehensive about the chances of an attack from the direction of **Monastir**. In a letter to **General Freyberg** he mentioned the steps that he was taking to meet such a threat. 'Some medium artillery and I believe a MG battalion may be ready to move within the next week. I am also taking their destinations up with Papagos, but I am anxious to increase the reserve consisting of the 3 RTR at Armintion [sic] and will probably send a good proportion there.' ¹

This explains why on 21 March 27 New Zealand (Machine Gun) Battalion, less one company, received orders to move to Amindaion. Next day Brigadier E. A. Lee, ² of **1 Australian Corps**, was warned that if an attack developed in that quarter he was to command 3 Royal Tank Regiment and 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion. In the meantime he was to advise General Kotulas on artillery matters. ³ Later 2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment (less one battery) was added to his command.

The advance party from 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, led by Lieutenant-Colonel **Gwilliam**, ⁴ left **Athens** on 22 March and followed the main highway through **Larisa** to **Elevtherokhorion**. But instead of branching north-east to **Mount Olympus** it continued north to **Servia Pass**, a gap in the northern hills which was afterwards defended by 4 Brigade. The town of **Servia** was below the escarpment; the **Aliakmon River**, about to enter the gorge in the eastern hills, was only a few miles farther on; and beyond it there was a long, gradual rise to **Kozani**, a

substantial town from which roads radiated eastwards to **Veroia** and **Salonika**, northwards to **Yugoslavia** and westwards to **Albania**.

From the wide ridge or plateau about **Kozani** the road to **Yugoslavia** descended to skirt the western edge of another plain and then passed through the Komanos Gap, a neat cleft in the low ridge which overlooks the straggling town of **Ptolemais**. Continuing north, it went through **Perdikha** and over undulating country until it reached **Amindaion**, a village set in poplar trees above the blue waters of Lake Petrais; south-west there were the marshes about Lake Roundik; and north again, beyond the two lakes, were high scrub-covered ridges.

¹ Wilson to **General Freyberg** and Brigadier Charrington, 20 March.

² Lee was a British officer commanding the medium artillery of **1 Australian Corps**. All such units were British: 64 Medium Regiment (211 and 234 Batteries) and 7 Medium Regiment (RHQ and one battery).

³ 64 Medium Regiment, RA, was supporting 12 Greek Division about **Veroia** and 20 Greek Division in the **Edhessa** area.

⁴ Lt-Col **F. J. Gwilliam**, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 9 May 1904; clerk; CO **27 (MG) Bn**, Aug 1940–Jul 1942; **24 Bn** Jul–Nov 1942; town clerk, **Auckland**.

The arrival of the machine-gunners came as a surprise to the commander of 3 Royal Tank Regiment, for he had received no warning orders and knew nothing about Brigadier Lee to whom the New Zealanders had to report. Somewhat baffled, Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam waited for the Brigadier, who did not arrive until 26 March.

Until then he spent his time inspecting the area. In the ridges to the north was **Klidhi Pass** ('the key'), by which the road and railway reached

the level country east of **Florina** and fringing the border of **Yugoslavia**. At first sight this mountain basin was not unlike the Mackenzie Country in New Zealand. But there were no fences whatsoever; a few peasants were ploughing with teams of slow-paced oxen; and about the foothills were white-walled, red-tiled villages. Strategically it was an important area, the meeting place of roads from **Salonika**, from **Yugoslavia** and from central **Greece** and **Albania**.

The two commanders eventually decided that two machine-gun companies would be forward of the ridge covering the approaches to the pass, one company to the east in the **Lofoi** area and the other to the west near **Palaistra**. A third company would deploy on the ridge immediately west of the pass, with the level plain before it patrolled by 3 Royal Tank Regiment. Once these decisions had been made the advance party picked out gun positions and prepared for the arrival of the battalion.

The convoy had left **Athens** on 25 March and was now well on its way. Three companies were to have gone to **Amindaion**, but **Freyberg** had signalled **W Force** Headquarters that he needed two not one. Nos. 3 and 4 Companies ¹ had consequently turned off at the **Elevtherokhorion** junction and gone over **Olympus Pass**. The others were moving north and finding it 'a pleasant enough drive through terribly rough country with tiny villages and desperately poor peasants.' Even so they were given a wonderful reception. There was always a Greek returned from **America** who could act as interpreter, garlands of flowers would be distributed and glasses of wine handed out to the noble allies.

At last on 28 March the battalion reached **Amindaion**. No. 1 Company was then sent to **Lofoi**, 2 Company to **Palaistra** and Battalion Headquarters with Headquarters Company to a position just off the road to the north-west of **Amindaion** and near the southern entrance to the **Klidhi Pass**. Their first task was to make a detailed reconnaissance of the area in front of the pass and to study the tracks over the hills to the rear in case they had to withdraw from their positions on the plain. There was, however,

¹ See p. 139.

an element of uncertainty about all this work. ‘After we got there plans were always changing and we had several alternative positions. We did not know what force would come up.’¹

¹ Major P. W. Wright, 2 i/c 27 Battalion.

TO GREECE

THE COUP D'ÉTAT IN YUGOSLAVIA

The Coup d'état in Yugoslavia

The uncertainty of those in command at **Amindaion** was not difficult to explain. General Papagos had never given up his hopes of holding the Metaxas line, thereby checking any thrust from **Bulgaria** and covering the Axios valley through which the Allied supply line from **Salonika** would have to enter **Yugoslavia**. Moreover, if that country did support the Allies and if her army was as strong as many military experts declared it to be, then there would be no need for a stronger force about **Amindaion**. The British commanders, on the other hand, had always argued that the Allies without the support of **Turkey** and **Yugoslavia** had not the strength to retain the Metaxas line, **Salonika** and western **Macedonia**. In their opinion, and they had won the argument, ² the greater part of the **Central Macedonian Army** had to be withdrawn to the Aliakmon line. To prevent the Germans driving through **Yugoslavia** and turning the northern end of that line, General Wilson had consequently been assembling the force at **Amindaion**.

But events in **Yugoslavia** had been causing complications. On 25 March, the day on which 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion had moved north from **Athens**, the Yugoslav Government adhered to the Tripartite Pact with **Germany**. General Papagos, accepting the situation, had then been prepared to withdraw his troops from eastern **Macedonia** to the Aliakmon line. Shortly afterwards, however, news arrived that the people of **Yugoslavia** were dissatisfied with the pact. Acting on this information Papagos declined ³ the offer of British transport and kept his divisions in eastern Macedonia. The *coup d'état* of 27 March which changed the government in Belgrade was definite proof, so far as he was concerned, of the wisdom of his policy. He now hoped that if his divisions remained on the borders of **Bulgaria** they would, in due time, link up with the armies of **Yugoslavia**.

The British were inclined to agree with him. The expedition was now 'in its true setting, not as an isolated military act, but as a prime mover in a large design.' ⁴ Eden and Dill, who had already reached **Malta**, hastened back to **Athens**, where they conferred first with Wilson and then with the Greek authorities. It was

² See p. 102.

³ Wilson, p. 79.

⁴ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 152, See p. 115.

decided that the Yugoslavs should be told that, if they moved into **Bulgaria** and **Albania** when the Germans entered **Greece**, the Allies would reinforce the defences along the Nestos River and the boundary of **Bulgaria**. At all costs they would protect the route up the Axios valley from **Salonika** into **Yugoslavia**.

At the end of March Dill paid a secret visit to Belgrade, but the Yugoslav leaders had no definite plans and no desire to take steps which might irritate **Germany**. The best that he could do was to arrange a conference at Kenali, near the border of **Yugoslavia**, between General Jankovitch, their Director of Operations, and Generals Papagos and Wilson. The Allied representatives went north from **Athens** on the night of 2–3 April so it was possible for **General Freyberg** to join the train and travel some distance with them.

That evening [2 April] I received a mysterious telegram to meet certain important people who were arriving by train at **Katerini** Station at 4.30 in the morning. To my surprise I met Mr Eden, General Dill, and General Wilson en route to **Florina** for a conference with the Yugo-Slav General Staff. I travelled up on the train with them as far as Aginion [**Aiyinion**] and heard the news and the plans which were in view. They were all in high spirits at the thought of Yugo-Slavia coming into the

War and, as a result, various new plans seemed to be under consideration, including the possible advance of the British Forces north to the Rupel Pass. In the short time I had I did my best to put the case from our point of view. Although I did not like the Metaxas Line,¹ it was a defensive position. With the help of Greek civilians we had improved the tank obstacle considerably and we had put out a great deal of wire. If we moved from this we might well be caught on the open plains without any defence against the German mechanised forces. Our only armoured force was the 1 Armoured Brigade whose original role was to delay the enemy to the maximum between the Axios and Aliakmon Rivers. I also hinted that we were not an Army—that so far we had only got the NZ Division in the forward area. On getting back to my HQ I wrote as follows in my diary concerning this new plan: ‘The situation is a grave one; we shall be fighting against heavy odds in a plan that has been ill-conceived and one that violates every principle of military strategy.’²

This was soon equally clear to the British commanders. They had gone forward to **Edhessa** and back through the mountains to **Amindaion**, through the **Klidhi Pass** and the defence posts of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion to **Florina**, and beyond that again to a siding just south of the border of **Yugoslavia**. In the railcar that night, 3–4 April, they had their conference with General Jankovitch, who made the policy of **Yugoslavia** quite clear. If the Axis group attempted to take **Salonika** with the aim of encircling **Yugoslavia** from the south, **Yugoslavia** would resist and be prepared to co-operate with the Allied armies. She herself would

¹ This was an error: the Aliakmon line was meant.

² Report on New Zealand Division in **Greece**, pp. 11–12.

decide just when she would make that move, but she was quite willing to have plans prepared for any eventuality. In fact, Jankovitch had brought with him the draft plans by which she was willing to commit her divisions. Five British divisions were to go forward to the

Lake Doiran area as a link between the army of **Yugoslavia** and the Greek forces along the Metaxas line. At the appropriate moment, which would be decided in Belgrade, the Allied forces were to open an offensive against the Italians in **Albania** and to the rear and right flank of the Germans advancing towards **Salonika**.

In the discussion which then developed the Allied representatives had to explain that such an ambitious plan was impossible. Moreover it was quite obvious that Jankovitch had not the authority to make any important decisions. The best they could do was to make suggestions and thereafter hope for the best. 'General Papagos urged General J. to persuade his Government to send two more divisions into southern **Serbia** so as to ensure no break in the hinge joining the Allies; whilst I again stressed the importance of stopping a tank break through and of fighting on ground where the Yugoslav soldier would find himself superior to the German. At two o'clock in the morning General J. departed; opportunity for meeting him again never recurred. This closed the most unusual and at the same time the most unsatisfactory conference I have ever attended.' ¹

On the other hand, it was now quite clear that there had been a tendency to overestimate the contribution which **Yugoslavia** could make to the Allied cause. Her leaders apparently thought that they could make decisions in their own good time, 'whereas it was most likely the Germans would make them for them.' ² And, even more important, her army as a fighting unit was now of very doubtful quality.

This hesitancy on the part of **Yugoslavia** placed Wilson and Papagos in a very difficult position so on 4 April, during the train journey from the conference, they discussed their problems. The former thought that the Germans might follow their favourite practice of attacking on the flanks, in which case there could be an encircling move from the east towards the Strumica River ³ or possibly a thrust across south-east **Yugoslavia** which might end up as an advance into **Greece** through the **Monastir Gap**. First Armoured Brigade had therefore to be retained west of the Axios

¹ Wilson, p. 83.

² Ibid.

³ This river is called the Strimon in Greece, the Struma and Strumitsa in Bulgaria, and the Strumica in Yugoslavia.

River, ready to move forward or, if there was a threat from Monastir, to retire through the mountains to Amindaion.

In the opinion of General Papagos, however, the Monastir Gap was less important than the routes through the mountains into Macedonia and south towards Salonika. That from Bulgaria went through the Metaxas line by way of the Rupel Pass; that from Yugoslavia, the only supply line in the case of war, followed the valley of the Vardar (Axios) River. To control them he thought that several units from the Allied army should be moved forward from the Aliakmon line.

If the British resources had been greater and the support of Yugoslavia more certain this would have been a reasonable plan. But Wilson did not wish his troops to be caught on the move at this stage of the campaign; he preferred to remain where he was until the political situation was less obscure. So the final decision was that there should be no move beyond the Aliakmon line for at least eight days.

TO GREECE

THE PROBLEMS OF W FORCE

The Problems of W Force

Neither Blamey nor **Freyberg** seems to have been fully aware of the web within which the attitude of **Yugoslavia** had now enmeshed Wilson and Papagos. Anxious about their respective divisions, the Dominion commanders had long since wanted to move back from the plain to the mountains. On 20 March, for instance, after Wilson released 19 Greek Motorised Division from the central sector for an anti-parachute role in the Axios valley and the Doiran Gap, he had to inform **Freyberg** that his 6 Brigade, instead of filling the gap between 4 Brigade and 19 Greek Motorised Division, would have to take over the coastal sector from the Greeks. The warning order explained the position very bluntly: 'As soon as you have got two Bdes up you must relieve 19 G Div and let them go. You may not like this but it can't be helped. It is imperative that they be released for service NE.' ¹

General Freyberg thereupon pointed out that as he would have insufficient troops to hold this extended sector it could not be wise to have them on the plain to the north of **Katerini**. They would be better placed in the passes adjoining **Mount Olympus**. The Australian officers were of the same opinion. Lieutenant- Colonel H. Wells, the senior Australian liaison officer, who had already inspected the line, thought that it was not sound 'to hold the open country north of **Katerine**, rather than the passes to the south.' On 23 March **Freyberg** warned Blamey, who was then inspecting the line, that until reinforcements arrived about 4 April

¹ Brigadier A. Galloway, BGS **W Force**, to **General Freyberg**, 20 Mar 1941.

he, **Freyberg**, had to hold a front of nearly 15 miles with only two

infantry brigades, one field regiment of artillery and no anti-tank guns whatsoever. If 5 Brigade and 7 Anti-Tank Regiment did come through by that date his division would still be 'too thin on the ground.' Blamey's opinion had then been that the New Zealand Division should be withdrawn from the plain to the foothills of **Mount Olympus**. In fact he had said that as soon as he became corps commander he would order such an adjustment to the Aliakmon line. ¹

On the strength of this statement **General Freyberg** had that same day explained the position to General Wilson. On his present front of 16,000 yards he had 4 Brigade. Given time and material he could, with 6 Brigade and normal fire support, make it reasonably secure. The more level sector along the coast which was held by 19 Greek Motorised Division was a totally different proposition. The retention of its 12,500 yards of front was a task for a complete division. Yet he understood that his three brigades, less the machine-gun companies at **Amindaion**, would have to take over both sectors. 'Should this be so the enemy will have no difficulty in penetrating at any place where he chooses to concentrate. In my opinion at best a division on front of 28,500 yards is not a defensive position and it will only be able to delay enemy a matter of one or two days. I am of course not in the picture as regards general situation but if as I understand present line is to be held as a long term policy I suggest it is most unsound and that main position should be prepared and occupied covering mountain pass 14 miles south-west of **Katerini**. Present position could then be held by mobile troops.' ²

The reply from **W Force** Headquarters on 24 March was that General Wilson 'considers heavy attack on your front unlikely as compared one via Edessa.' No additional troops ³ were available but **General Freyberg** had to make certain that the enemy did not force the passes east and west of **Mount Olympus**. The Divisional Cavalry Regiment, when it arrived, 'should more than compensate for departure of 19 Greek Div.' ⁴

The same day General Blamey returned to **Athens** and discussed the subject with General Wilson. The following decisions were made:

The defence of the passes on the British front is of paramount importance. Work on these defences should be given priority. **General Freyberg** will be so informed by Brigadier Galloway. NZ Div Cav Regt will be avail-

¹ **1 Australian Corps diary.**

² **HQ NZ Division 'G' diary, p. 25A.**

³ **Two companies from 27 MG Battalion, not one, were switched from the **Amindaion** area to **Mount Olympus**.**

⁴ **Milgreece to NZ Division, O. 143, 24 March.**

able

very shortly to take over forward role and these are sufficient to relieve remainder of Div in advanced positions to allow the Div to prepare defences of **Katerini (Olympus) Pass** and pass between sea and **Mt Olympus**. ¹

In other words, the New Zealand Division was to remain behind the anti-tank ditch to the north of **Katerini**, but **General Freyberg** had, at the same time, to prepare demolitions and garrison the passes about **Mount Olympus**. He was warned ² that he must make certain of the passes on either side of **Mount Olympus**. 'Everything you do in front must be subservient to that important factor, for if the passes are lost it would be awkward.' Nineteenth Greek Motorised Division had to be released as early as possible. 'The Greeks are counting on it, for what it is worth—in an anti-parachute role out in front of the plain. They may be of some use.'

¹ **Notes on interview Wilson-Blamey.**

TO GREECE

THE ALIAKMON LINE

The Aliakmon Line

The necessary operation orders ³ were accordingly prepared. The battalions of 6 Brigade, having reached **Katerini** during 22–25 March, were free to take over the coastal sector from the Greeks: 24 Battalion went to the extreme right about Neon Elevtherokhorion and Skala **Elevtherokhorion** in the strip between the sea and the highway to **Salonika**; 25 Battalion went to the area about the church to Ayios Elias. ⁴ The unit in reserve, 26 Battalion, was to have been at **Koukos**, near **Katerini**, but the task of preparing the defences of the passes, as well as those of the Aliakmon line, forced **Divisional Headquarters** to send D Company to the Platamon tunnel area ⁵ and the rest of the unit to the **Mount Olympus** area.

In the sector on the left flank which had been the responsibility of 4 Brigade for the past two weeks, 18 Battalion now held the ridges about the villages of **Paliostani** and Mikri Milia and 20 Battalion was to its left about Radhani. D Company 19 Battalion was at the entrance to **Olympus Pass** but the battalion as a whole had been in reserve along the Chaknakhora ridge. Like 26 Battalion in the coastal sector, it was now withdrawn and employed about the eastern approaches to the pass during the period 28 March– 1 April.

The divided interest of the two brigades—along the Aliakmon line and about **Olympus Pass**—was not the only unusual feature of the defence system. The 15-mile front was so exceptionally

³ NZ Division Operation Order No. 2, 27 March.

⁴ Ayios, usually abbreviated Ay, means Saint.

wide that areas which would normally have been allocated to battalions were held by single companies sited on spurs or high ground and prepared for all-round defence. There was still an undefended gap of some 5500 yards between the western boundary of 4 Brigade and the mountain sector held by 12 Greek Division. Wire and sandbags were available for 4 Brigade, but 6 Brigade had to make the best use it could of any material left behind by 12 Greek Division. In fact the only strong point appeared to be the deep anti-tank ditch that was being cut from the coast north of Skala **Elevtherokhorion** to the Toponitsa River and thence to the source of the shallow stream in the area north-west of **Paliostani**.

In the area behind the line there were equally serious problems arising from limited time and inadequate resources. The different companies of engineers had not only to improve the system of communications but they had also to assist in the preparation of defensive positions. No. 1 Section 6 Field Company had therefore been brought forward from **Olympus Pass** to the 4 Brigade area, and Nos. 2 and 3 from the north of **Katerini** to the 6 Brigade area. Nineteenth Army Troops Company had No. 3 Section ¹ on the western side of **Mount Olympus** preparing **W Force** Headquarters at **Tsaritsani**; No. 2 was completing work begun by 6 Field Company at the crest of the pass; and No. 1 was improving the roads in the Gannokhora area. Fifth Field Park Company was erecting trestle bridges and handling the explosives and stores arriving at **Larisa** and **Katerini**. Seventh Field Company reached **Katerini** on 7 April, just before the divisional withdrawal but not in time to do any work in the forward areas.

So far as possible the engineers, and not the infantry, did the more specialised work along the front. Demolition charges were laid on the bridges, railway embankments and anti-tank crossing in the 6 Brigade area. The allocation of mines and the selection of sites for them are

mentioned in official instructions but there is no record of their having been laid in any area. With the anti-tank ditch there was more progress. The Greek plans for a continuous line across the front had to be dropped but every effort was made to complete a series of defended localities. The only trouble was that the half-completed positions were not always suitable for all-round defence. The battalions had therefore to dig, wire and camouflage positions; the engineers had to construct a concrete pillbox in each company area. The local Greeks gave

¹ The detachment of this unit from the Division without prior consultation raised some objections from **General Freyberg**. The **BGS W Force**, who had used the first available unit, explained his point of view: 'There is NO intention to start stealing your units again ... we are all trying to make this show work at short notice and under great difficulties....'

what assistance they could, the old men, the women and the boys doing the work of those who were away on active service. Clifton noted: 'Still some difficulty getting Greek engineers properly functioning on our line of thought regarding defences and pill boxes. They are sound and their 4000 labourers going well, but language is a serious difficulty.' This was better appreciated by Captain Carrie, ¹ of the New Zealand Engineers, who had to pay the labourers. On pay-days he would depart 'dazed and almost crazy leaving behind a mutinous and vociferous crowd whose names had somehow been left off the rolls altogether and who were now adopting a menacing attitude towards the by now demented and almost speechless Union officials.'

At the same time the CRA, Brigadier Miles, and his Brigade Major, Major R. C. Queree, had been preparing for the arrival of the Divisional Artillery. As the extended front, particularly on the left flank, made it impossible for the infantry to hold a complete line, the German advance would have to be checked by artillery fire and counter-attack. The gun positions had therefore to be in places which the enemy could not observe either from his own territory or from the gaps between the

defended localities. This necessity, together with the south-easterly slope of the ridges, the steep gullies and the lack of tracks connecting them made the selection of positions difficult, but, in the end, these requirements were met, at the expense, however, of anti-tank fields of fire. No serious consequences came from this decision, but events were soon to show that too much reliance had been placed on the supposedly anti-tank nature of the country.

It was decided that 6 Brigade, astride the main highway, should be covered by 4 and 5 Field Regiments (less E Troop) and that 4 Brigade should be supported by 6 Field Regiment. Fourth Field Regiment, which had reached **Katerini** on 26 March, was in position by 30 March with its guns covering the front from the coast to Katakhas. Fifth Field Regiment, arriving on 31 March, sent E Troop 26 Battery to the **Aliakmon River** on 2 April and moved to the rear of 6 Brigade on 4 April. Sixth Field Regiment reached **Katerini** on 1 April and was in support of 4 Brigade by 5 April. By then **1 Survey Troop** was making a minor triangulation of the front and Headquarters Divisional Artillery had been established in the village of **Kalokhori**.

There were no anti-tank guns until 7 Anti-Tank Regiment arrived at **Katerini** on 2 April. As the most suitable route for enemy tanks was along the main road and railway, 32 and 33 Batteries, with B Troop from 31 Battery under command, were

¹ **Maj M. S. Carrie**, m.i.d.; Hastings; born **Wanganui**, 18 Apr 1910; research chemist.

allocated to 6 Brigade, whose sector included these avenues of approach. The great difficulty was the shortage of men and guns. Battalion commanders were inclined to expect anti-tank gunners to cover gaps in the infantry positions; the gunners complained that obvious anti-tank positions had to be left unoccupied because no infantry support was possible. Another problem was the actual siting of the guns. The fashionable theory brought out from **Britain** by the

gunners was that the tanks should be knocked out after they had penetrated the infantry positions. The infantry commanders naturally preferred that the tanks should be halted as they approached their defences. In the end three guns were placed well forward to cover the crossings over the anti-tank ditch and the others sited behind the main ridge. As 4 Brigade occupied an area that was less suitable for tanks, only 31 Battery, less the troop with 6 Brigade, came under its command. The eight guns were then placed under the command of the battalions and incorporated in their defence plans. ¹

The only other supporting weapons were those of 3 and 4 Companies 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion which had reached **Katerini** on 27 March. The former, under the command of 6 Brigade, now had platoons with the flank battalions to act in a 'counter penetration' role. The latter with similar instructions was in the 22 Battalion area along the ridge to the south of **Tranos**.

The field ambulance with each brigade provided advanced and main dressing stations. Thus 4 Field Ambulance, which was in the rough country with 4 Brigade, had its ADS in dugouts cut into the hillsides and its MDS 13 miles away at **Kalokhori**. The medical cases from 6 Brigade had at first been the responsibility of an MDS set up near this village by 5 Field Ambulance, but after 30 March 6 Field Ambulance had two ADSs behind the brigade lines, one at **Sfendhami** dug in and camouflaged, and the other at **Koukos** in the shelter of a stone shed. The MDS was well back near **Kato Melia** and among the oak trees at the foot of **Olympus Pass**.

At this stage of the war there was 'a very general opinion that the German Army would not respect the **Red Cross** if displayed by our medical units. It ... led to unnecessary difficulties in the forward medical units. Partly because of this, the forward ADSs and MDSs were placed in positions chosen for their obscurity and camouflage value and the possibility of sinking the tent floors below ground level. There were no large Red Crosses displayed on the roofs of ambulances. As a result medical units were subjected to bombing and machine-gunning from the

air. As the short
cam-

¹ See map on p. 143.

paign

proceeded it was learnt that the Germans did respect the **Red Cross.**'

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The structure of the divisional defence system was now complete. No additional troops were ever brought forward but some slight changes were made on 2 April after **General Freyberg** had discussed the arrangements with the commanders of 4 and 6 Brigades. Divisional Headquarters was moved from **Katerini** to **Ay Ioannis** to form a battle headquarters. The boundary between the brigades was shifted westwards, giving 6 Brigade a wider frontage and making it necessary to have three battalions in the line. Twenty-sixth Battalion, now released from the Divisional Reserve because of the arrival of 5 Brigade, was therefore sent forward between 24 and 25 Battalions. In the 4 Brigade sector the only change was the return of 19 Battalion from the **Mount Olympus** area; as brigade reserve it could now be used for counter-attack without the consent of Divisional Headquarters.

The Divisional Reserve in the **Tranos** area was still of limited strength. Twenty-second Battalion, with 4 Company 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion under command, was deployed along the ridge, while Headquarters 7 Anti-Tank Regiment with 34 Battery (less O Troop) covered the anti-tank obstacles between **Pal Elevation** and **Sfendhami**.

¹ T. D. M. Stout, *New Zealand Medical Services in Middle East and Italy*, p. 146.

TO GREECE

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY REGIMENT ALONG THE ALIAKMON RIVER

Divisional Cavalry Regiment Along the Aliakmon River

Nearly 15 miles north of the anti-tank ditch was the muddy **Aliakmon River** with its coastal swamp and high stopbanks. As the road and railway bridges in the stretch between Megali Yefira and Karavi were particularly important, the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, when it arrived at **Katerini**, was ordered to that area. After resisting as long as possible any attempts to make a crossing, the squadrons would fight a series of delaying actions and eventually withdraw through the main defences. On 1 April the regiment moved to the river, A Squadron taking the eastern section, B Squadron going to the west and Advanced Regimental Headquarters, with C Squadron as reserve, occupying the area about the village of Paliambela. Efforts were then made to improve the roads and the armoured cars were dug into the river bank until there was just sufficient clearance for the Vickers machine guns. On the escarpments to the south, observation points were established to overlook the approaches from **Salonika**, the plain of **Macedonia** to the north and the gorge near **Veroia** from which the river left the western mountains.

To assist the regiment in its delaying role two troops of artillery were sent up. E Troop 28 Battery 5 Field Regiment (Captain **Bevan** ¹), which arrived with its four 25-pounders on 2 April, had to prepare to shell the crossroads at **Yidha**, the road south to the bridge and any enemy formations that attempted to cross the river. O Troop 34 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment (Lieutenant **Patterson** ²) came up on 3 April and was placed under command of A Squadron. Two of its two-pounders, each supported by an armoured car, covered the main road bridge; the other two, with similar support, covered the railway bridge.

No. 3 Section 6 Field Company was responsible for the demolitions in the area, particularly those on the bridges across the Aliakmon River. The charges were not, however, to be placed in position until orders had

been received from Divisional Headquarters.

On 4 April there was one change in the strength of the Divisional Cavalry Regiment. First Armoured Brigade on the Macedonian Plain was seriously handicapped by a shortage of reconnaissance vehicles so, in exchange for seven cruiser tanks, two troops of Marmon Harrington armoured cars were sent over under the command of Lieutenant **Atchison**³ and Second-Lieutenant **Cole**.⁴ In their new role they were to be the first New Zealand units in action in **Greece**.⁵

¹ **Maj T. H. Bevan**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Onehunga**; born **London**, 27 May 1909; builder; bty comd 7 A-Tk Regt and 4 Fd Regt; wounded 17 Dec 1942.

² **Lt-Col D. B. Patterson**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 30 Nov 1910; assistant architect; 2 i/c 14 Lt AA Regt Apr–Nov 1944; CO 14 Lt AA Regt Jun–Jul 1944; comd Miles Wing, Reception Gp (UK), Jun–Sep 1945.

³ **Maj A. C. Atchison**; born NZ 30 Aug 1907; farmer; died **Clevedon**, 25 Jul 1955.

⁴ **Maj D. A. Cole**, MC; **Tikorangi**; born NZ 2 Oct 1913; farmer; three times wounded.

⁵ See pp. 194– 5.

TO GREECE

THE OLYMPUS PASS DEFENCES

The Olympus Pass Defences

At the same time new positions were being prepared about **Mount Olympus**. In the pass itself two companies from 18 Battalion had started work immediately after the arrival of 4 Brigade. One had soon returned to its unit but the other had remained until 22 March, when it was relieved by a company from 19 Battalion. After 25 March, when **General Freyberg** was warned that he must prepare for the withdrawal to the mountains, much greater effort had to be made so the reserve battalions of 4 and 6 Brigades were employed about the pass until 5 Brigade arrived from **Athens**.

Nineteenth Battalion was brought back on 28 March to the north side of the pass; a guard was placed on that rocky feature called **Gibraltar**; and positions were prepared on the north bank of the **Mavroneri River**. Twenty-sixth Battalion, which had moved to the reserve area for 6 Brigade on 27 March, received its orders and was back that night at the **Petras Sanatorium** on the south side of the pass. The next two days were spent making a road suitable for motor traffic from the Sanatorium southwards to **Ravani**. After the campaign Brigadier Hargest when describing the tracks of the area said, 'one built mainly by 26th Bn was an especially fine piece of work, going from the road straight up a mountain side for hundreds of feet—it was completed in a short day and allowed eight guns to fire from a totally unsuspected spot straight down the enemy's line of approach.'¹

The orders for 5 Brigade had already been issued. It had to prepare and occupy defensive positions astride the pass on **Mount Olympus**, which would be held in strength; the coastal route by way of the **Platamon** tunnel would be held by one company, though preparations would be made for a battalion 'should circumstances require it.'

The first unit to arrive was 23 Battalion, which moved into the Sanatorium area on 31 March, thereby making it possible for 26 Battalion to return to the 6 Brigade sector. The following day 28 (Maori) Battalion went to the north side of the pass and 19 Battalion returned to 4 Brigade. The other units of 5 Brigade were not as yet sent to the pass. On 1 April 22 Battalion ² had gone to Tranos, where it was under command of 6 Brigade and part of Divisional Reserve. Twenty-first Battalion ³ was still in the **Athens- Piræus** area under the command of **80 Base Sub-area**.

The defences were along the eastern slopes of **Mount Olympus**, with dense undergrowth on the lower level and an oak-beech forest above. Twenty-third Battalion held the right flank; 22 Battalion, when it returned, was to hold the pass and 28 (Maori) Battalion the left or northern flank. As the front of some eight to nine miles was too wide for the number of men available, the system of defence had to be similar to that adopted by the other brigades: 'Our sub-sectors will be held by pl or even coy localities and sited on spurs and high ground. Localities will be prepared for all round defence. All posts will be dug in and wired.' ⁴

Twenty-three Battalion occupied a ridge that ran almost parallel to the main range. D Company, somewhat isolated on the extreme right, covered the approaches from the east; C Company had the section which included **Lokova**, a village on the foothills; A and B Companies were strung out along the ridge towards the buildings of the Sanatorium. To an artist these posts would have been enchanting; to the thoughtful soldier the broken country, the
under-

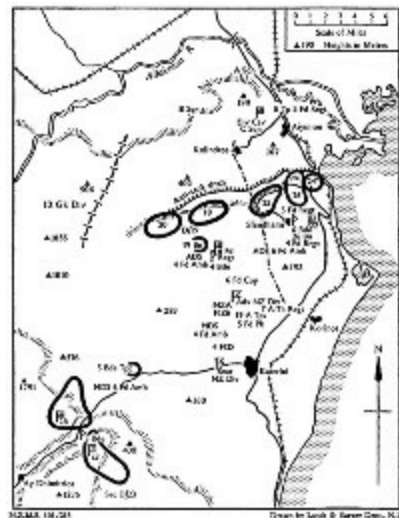
¹ Report by Brigadier Hargest.

² See p. 140.

³ See pp. 161– 2.

growth

and the wide front immediately suggested infiltration. Nevertheless the scenery was impressive, for the battalion from the clearings amidst the oak trees overlooked ridges cloaked with saplings and dense undergrowth, a belt of scrub and the plain with its many villages. Above it loomed **Mount Olympus**, looking like some peak in the Southern Alps when seen from a beach on the West Coast. From **Larisa** it had been an unimpressive rounded mass but from the Macedonian side it was, without question, the abode of the Gods.



THE ALIAKMON LINE. THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION'S EARLY POSITIONS IN GREECE, 5 APRIL 1941

There were admittedly some unpleasant hours of mist and rain, but it was springtime and the woods were ‘carpeted with vast banks of polyanthus, primroses, hyacinths and violets’; ¹ the newly cut tracks were often greasy and requiring attention, but the life was invigorating and the men were fit. They had to site section posts, cut fields of fire and erect wire through the undergrowth. ‘Rarely, if ever again, did the battalion take such pains over a defensive position.’ ²

The greatest problem was that of communications. The only vehicle access from the main highway was by the road to the Sanatorium which 26 Battalion had extended along the ridge. The junction, however, being at a lower level, was too far forward of the positions for the route to be a safe supply line. It was therefore decided that a serviceable track must be cut round the shoulder of **Mount Olympus** and south-west to **Kokkinoplos**, a village from which a rough but passable road went down to the **Kozani- Larisa** highway. On 6 April Major **Hart**³ and 200 men from 22 Battalion came over to begin the work. Soon afterwards when the situation in the **Balkans** deteriorated and there was every possibility of withdrawal, the track became even more important. The battalion could reach the main highway only by moving across its front to the mouth of the pass where, with others also on the move, there would inevitably be congestion and delay. Engineers were therefore called in to make the track capable of carrying gun tractors over the ridges to **Kokkinoplos**.

Until 22 Battalion was released from the Divisional Reserve, the defence of the entrance of the pass was the responsibility of B Company 28 (Maori) Battalion. At first the Maoris had one platoon south of the highway 'on the Gibraltar outcrop' and the others north of it. Later the whole company went forward another 1000 yards to cover the junction of the highway and the road to 23 Battalion.

The other Maori companies held the left flank or northern side of the pass, first A Company, then C Company behind the village of Kariai and D Company still farther north overlooking Haduladhika. If all went well, the line was to be extended still farther north to link up with 16 Australian Brigade in the **Veroia** Pass area.

The Maoris hastened to prepare their positions among the heavily wooded spurs half parallel to the main range. They had a clear view of the highway, but the foreground was thick with bracken and wild pears and cut by many high-banked streams. In

¹ 23 Battalion war diary.

² Angus Ross, *23 Battalion*, p. 31.

³ Maj I. A. Hart, m.i.d.; born NZ 24 Oct 1904; barrister and solicitor; died of wounds 2 Nov 1942.

such country a determined enemy would inevitably adopt a policy of infiltration which would be very difficult to resist. As it was, the Maoris had serious problems of communication and had attempted to cut foot tracks through the dense undergrowth. But up to date all weapons, ammunition, wire and rations had been packed through to the outlying platoons. In fact the simplest way to reach C and D Companies was to go six miles forward from the pass and then turn north-west and so back to Kariai and Haduladhika. If the battalion had to withdraw it would be quite impossible to move south across the front to the main highway. The only possible line of retreat was up the Mavroneri creek and over the timbered ridges to join the road near the crest of the pass.

The other units of the brigade group were not so widely dispersed. All B Echelon transport was assembled forward of the pass at **Kato Melia**. Fifth Field Ambulance, which had moved north with the brigade, had established a Main Dressing Station near **Dholikhi**, on the western side of the pass, for the use of New Zealand units working in that area. In the event of hostilities the casualties from the brigade would be brought back up the pass road and through the Advanced Dressing Station which had been established between the crest and **Ay Dhimitrios**.

No guns were yet in the area, for all regiments were needed behind 4 and 6 Brigades. The best that Brigadiers Miles and Hargest could do was to select positions and arrange for the construction of the necessary roads and tracks.

The engineers, however, were able to give more attention to the

pass. The sections of 6 Field Company had been called forward to the Aliakmon line, but after 24 March their work at Ay Dhimitrios was continued by No. 2 Section 19 Army Troops Company. The main demolition was initially prepared in the narrow gorge below the village, with a sapper permanently on guard to protect it from enemy or fifth-column interference and, if necessary, to explode it on orders from the officer in command of the covering party. That officer had very definite instructions:

He will receive his orders either in writing signed by Div Comd or verbally from a senior staff officer who will be in possession of written orders from Div Comd. The OC covering party will satisfy himself that these written orders are genuine. Under no circumstances whatever will OC Covering Party fire the charge.

After 5 Brigade took over, the demolition was shifted to the area held in the first stages by 28 (Maori) Battalion. Other demolitions were prepared on the bridges covering the approaches to the pass and three additional charges were placed on the main highway at points selected by Brigadier Hargest and the CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton.

TO GREECE

THE COASTAL ROUTE AND THE PLATAMON TUNNEL

The Coastal Route and the Platamon Tunnel

The pass to the east of **Mount Olympus** was more complex in character. It began as the **Pinios Gorge** separating Mounts Ossa and **Olympus**, continued north as a narrow coastal strip, and ended as a steep ridge flanking **Mount Olympus** and ending in great cliffs above the sea. Access to the plain beyond depended upon the railway tunnel at **Platamon** and a rough track across the ridge. In the opinion of the intelligence officer who prepared a report upon the area, 8-cwt trucks could be taken over but for heavier vehicles there would have to be considerable improvement. If there were demolitions in the tunnel and in the narrower parts of the gorge, the 'eastern pass' could be held by one battalion.

On 27 March D Company 26 Battalion was, accordingly, instructed to move by train from **Katerini** to the **Platamon** area and there prepare positions to meet an attack from the north. The Divisional Engineers would provide 1000 yards of wire and make preparations to demolish the tunnel 'when emergency occurs'. The company, under the command of Captain Huggins, ¹ arrived that night, detrained at the miniature railway station and next morning went up the tracks to the crest of the ridge.

At the seaward end was a castle, ² farther up the ridge a small hillock, Point 266, and beyond that the village of **Pandeleimon** and the lower slopes of **Mount Olympus**. The company's first task was the preparation of a post about the castle, but after Colonel Stewart inspected the area on 30 March he ordered the construction of positions for a whole battalion. There would be a post at the castle, another one would cover it from the rear, and the line would be extended up the ridge beyond Point 266.

'The men were impressed with the urgency and importance of the job

and worked very intelligently and with a will throughout.’³ On 4 April **General Freyberg** with Brigadier Hargest and Colonel Stewart visited the area and ‘expressed satisfaction with what had been done....’⁴ The General stated that if a battalion took over it would be expected to hold for only twenty-four hours: by then reinforcements would have been sent up from **Larisa**.

The demolitions in the tunnel were the responsibility of the CRE. The orders for firing them were just as carefully worded as those for 5 Brigade in **Olympus Pass**, but because of the isolation of the sector the senior officer or NCO on the spot could, in face of serious enemy attack, fire the charges without his having received written authority to do so.

¹ **Lt-Col F. W. Huggins**; born England, 29 Jan 1894; importer; died (in **UK**) 19 Nov 1945.

² In 1204 the Franks under the banner of Boniface, Marquis of Montferrat, Crusader *par excellence*, invaded **Greece** intent on partitioning the Byzantine Empire. The Franks early occupied **Larisa**, **Thermopylae** and the Vale of **Tempe**. Here Boniface created the fiefdom of Boudonitza for the Marquis Guido Pallavicini, who erected at **Platamon** the castle that for two centuries guarded the coastal pass. Now, seven centuries later, the ruins of this castle became the focal point for the defences of a New Zealand battalion.

³ Capt Huggins's report.

⁴ *Ibid.*

TO GREECE

UNITS CONTINUE TO ARRIVE

Units Continue to Arrive

Throughout this period the remaining units of the Division were steadily coming up from **Athens**, but the order of their arrival had not been intelligently planned by those who had arranged the embarkation. The Divisional Postal Section, for instance, had an office at **Hymettus Camp** by 15 March, another at **Voula** by 20 March and one at **Katerini** by 24 March. As early as 21 March the Divisional Provost Section was at **Kalokhori** and the Field Punishment Centre at **Katerini**. The Headquarters staff, on the other hand, owing to their late departure from Egypt and to the delays of the storm period, made a very late arrival. 'For fifteen days I had only two Staff officers in **Greece**, my GSO I and AA & QMG, who had travelled across with me.' ¹

Divisional Signals arrived at **Katerini** on 25 March; until then there had been no signals office at Divisional Headquarters. J Section which had travelled with 4 Brigade had, however, established communication with **Athens** by the civil lines and requisitioned the line between **Palionellini** and **Katerini**. K Section with 5 Brigade had built up a system in the **Mount Olympus** area. And now with the assistance of **W Force** Signals it was possible to complete the divisional signals system before the invasion of **Greece**.

As there was always the possibility of the civil lines being tapped, the Field Security Section, after its appearance on 27 March, checked civilians and watched for any fifth-column activities. In all calls to **Athens** a high-grade cipher was used and, for messages within the area, there were twenty-seven typewritten pages of codenames for units, places, equipment and supplies. Some interruptions were due to breaks within the cable 'plainly made by pounding the wire between two stones.' Others were due to the needs of the local peasantry. One shepherd by tethering his bell wether with a length of cable caused a

full-scale field security spy hunt. The wireless sets, apart from some test exercises, were not used for there had to be complete wireless silence until operations began. Consequently, the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** when it was sent forward to the **Aliakmon River** used its No. 11 sets for nothing other than daily test calls.

¹ **General Freyberg, Report on the New Zealand Division in Greece, p. 8. See p. 123.**

The units of the New Zealand **Army Service Corps** were about **Katerini** before and after the arrival of Divisional Headquarters. Until 25 March the troops had dry rations, but once Headquarters New Zealand **Army Service Corps** arrived at **Kalokhori** ¹ a Greek officer assisted the Requisitioning Officer to purchase fresh rations, and thereafter New Zealand vehicles brought bread from **Athens**, vegetables from **Salonika** and meat from both cities. The responsibility of drawing these supplies and building up reserve dumps of dry rations was left to the front-line transport of all units except 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion at **Amindaion**, which was supplied by the Divisional Supply Column. If the units were east of Mount **Olympus** they went to No. 4 Field Supply Depot at Neon **Keramidhi**; if they were on the **Larisa** side they went to No. 1 Field Supply Depot on the plain below the western entrance of **Olympus Pass**. This left the Supply Column free to establish itself at Neon **Keramidhi** and bring in supplies from both **Katerini** and **Larisa**.

The **Army Service Corps** units were, for the most part, on the **Larisa** side of the mountain. The Ammunition Company had reached **Katerini** on 25 March and had then taken ammunition from the railhead to the forward areas, but after 3 April it operated from **Larisa**, attached to **81 Base Sub-area** and running convoys to **Servia** and **Amindaion**. The Petrol Company worked in **Athens** during 21–25 March, reached a base just north of **Elasson** on 29 March and thereafter trucked petrol from **Larisa**. Fourth Reserve Mechanical Transport Company, after spending 21–27 March about **Athens** and **Piræus**, went to the **Larisa** area, where it

encamped at **Nikaia**, attached to **81 Base Sub-area**. From there dumps were established about **Larisa**, supplies were taken to **Servia** and **Kozani**, and, on 4–7 April, Greek troops were transported from **Veroia** to **Edhessa**.

The servicing of divisional transport was done by 1 Field Workshops from a point six miles west of **Katerini**; Ordnance duties were the responsibility of Major **Andrews**,² Assistant Director of Ordnance Services, who had opened his office at **Kalokhori** on 27 March.

¹ On 6 April it went to Gannokhora.

² **Brig A. H. Andrews**, OBE, m.i.d.; **London**; born **New Plymouth**, 11 Jan 1912; Regular soldier; ADOS 2 NZ Div 1941–42; CREME Dec 1942–Jun 1943, Jul 1944–Sep 1945; Commandant, **Waiouru** Military Camp, 1953–54; Commander, Central Military District, Nov 1954–Nov 1956; Senior Army Liaison Officer, **London**, 1957–.

TO GREECE

THE CHAIN OF MEDICAL EVACUATION

The Chain of Medical Evacuation

The last day of March saw the medical service of the Division more or less complete with main and advanced dressing stations in each brigade area. First General Hospital (Colonel A. C. McKillop) which would normally have been a base institution had, on instructions from Brigadier D. T. M. Large, Deputy Director of Medical Services, **W Force**, to be established along the line of communications. The **Larisa** area was malarious and the port of **Volos** was likely to be bombed, so the site eventually chosen was in a valley south of **Pharsala** and roughly halfway between **Athens** and the Aliakmon line. The hospital, with the **Mobile Dental Unit** (Major **Mackenzie** ¹) attached, moved in on 22 March; the first cases were received on 2 April; and two days later the New Zealand sisters arrived from **Athens**, where they had been billeted at **Kifisia** after their arrival on 27 March with the fifth flight.

The new site was charming. On the north side of the valley and alongside the small creek were the ruins of an old mill; at the head were groves of poplar trees and well turfed slopes already carpeted with spring flowers. In New Zealand it would have been classed as good sheep country; in fact, bearded shepherds did wander about the hillsides to the amazement of the troops, who had never seen sheep and goats with bells on their necks or savage dogs whose chief virtue was their ability to protect a flock.

¹ Maj **J. A. S. Mackenzie**, m.i.d.; Waikohowai, **Huntly**; born **Levin**, 26 Jun 1908; dental surgeon; OC NZ Mobile Dental Section, Jun 1940–Apr 1941; p.w. 25 Apr 1941.

TO GREECE

THE GREEK AND AUSTRALIAN DIVISIONS

The Greek and Australian Divisions

The Allies were also adjusting their positions. In the Greek- British Agreement ² signed on 4 March the Central Macedonian Army was to consist of three divisions and, if they could be withdrawn from the Turkish frontier, some seven unattached battalions. Until replaced by British units, the force would be responsible for the Aliakmon line. Twentieth Greek Division, which was made up of hastily instructed troops from the **Dodecanese**, had been destined for the Albanian front. Instead it had to march from **Florina** and take over the northern sector of the Aliakmon line. Twelfth Greek Division in western **Thrace** had, long before this, been drained of its best men and reinforced by older men with less modern equipment. The regiments were now shifted back by rail to occupy the central sector of the line between 20 Greek Division and the mountains south-east of **Veroia**. Nineteenth Greek Motorised Division, in the southern sector between the coast and **Mount Olympus**, was not impressive. 'It consists of just over 2000 quite untrained, recently enlisted garage hands. It has no prospect of fighting usefully as a mobile force, with its few bren carriers, motor cycles, and small cars, even if its commander knew how to employ them.' ³

Behind this light screen the British forces had moved up from **Piræus**, the New Zealanders to the Aliakmon line, 1 Armoured Brigade to the **Edhessa** area. The latter—4 Queen's Own Hussars with light tanks (Mark VIBs), 3 Battalion Royal Tank Regiment with cruiser tanks (Mark A10s) and part of the Support Group of the parent unit, **2 Armoured Division**—had crossed with the first and second flights and was now dispersed about the Macedonian Plain. Fourth Hussars, with one battery **2 Royal Horse Artillery**, was well forward near the Axios River with instructions to cover the demolitions and to fight a delaying action if the Germans advanced south-west across the plain. First Rangers, a

motorised battalion, was near the entrance to the pass behind **Edhessa** with a battery of **2 Royal Horse Artillery** and **102 Anti-Tank Regiment, Northumberland Hussars**, in support. The **155th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery** was about the plain from **Edhessa** eastwards to the **Axios River**. On the western side of the mountains **3 Royal Tank Regiment** had been retained at **Amindaion** to check any advance from **Yugoslavia** by way of the **Monastir Gap**. It was supported ¹ by **27 New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion** (less two companies) and **64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery**, all under the command of **Brigadier Lee**.

The **Australians** were the last to arrive. In **Wavell's** original plan **7 Division** was to have been the first to move but **Blamey**, on the grounds of insufficient training and equipment, had insisted that **6 Division** should be sent over from **Cyrenaica**. This demanded a swift withdrawal from the desert for on **7 March**, when the first flight of **British and New Zealand** troops were disembarking at **Piræus**, **16 Brigade** was still in **Tobruk**, **19 Brigade** was near **Tocra** and **17 Brigade** still farther west on the border of **Tripolitania**. Even so, **Corps Headquarters** and **16 Brigade** crossed with the fourth flight, the others with the sixth and seventh flights; and by **6 April** when the **Germans** invaded **Greece** **16 Brigade** was taking over the pass at **Veroia** from the **Greeks**, **19 Brigade** was moving up from **Piræus** and **17 Brigade** was about to leave **Alexandria**.

The movement, however, was not complete. The cavalry regiment had not embarked, no **Corps Engineers** had arrived and **64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery**, at **Amindaion** was the only medium artillery unit.

W Force had similar problems. The anti-aircraft allotment had always been small but on **6 April**, apart from three batteries with **BARBARITY Force** and one with the **Armoured Brigade**, only **Headquarters 2 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery**, **16 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery** and **155 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery** had arrived. **Headquarters Signals** was in **Greece** but there was a shortage of transport, engineer and maintenance units. The four mechanical transport companies available for base and line-of-communication duties were able to handle the situation, but there were

few vehicles available for Force Headquarters. The Australian and New Zealand divisions had their companies of engineers, a British field company was in the **Athens** area, another was detailed for Amindaion, and another was with **BARBARITY Force**. But only one other unit, 111 Workshop and Park Company of the **Royal Engineers**, was available for the preparation of the positions behind which **W Force** was to face the German Army.

² See p. 106.

³ Charrington to Wilson, 18 March.

¹ See p. 129.

TO GREECE

THE SUPPLY PROBLEM

The Supply Problem

There was also the question of supplies. The DA & QMG for **W Force**, when he arrived in **Athens** in February, had found that the British, if they were to fight a campaign in **Greece**, would have to supply themselves and very possibly the Greeks.

The Greek Army was ... already using its railways almost to maximum capacity, the country had been denuded of every animal, cart and motor vehicle which was fit for use, the Army had taken control of all small ships and practically all caiques; the available civilian labour (men, women and children) was all employed, largely on road maintenance. The civil population, moreover, was already badly off for food; there was no meat and flour was short and they had even to feed wheat to their pack transport owing to a shortage of barley. The British Military Mission in **Athens** had placed large orders for equipment, stores, food, coal, etc. at home and occasional ships were arriving from **Britain**, but the programme of fulfilment of the orders could not be predicted at all. From a Greek point of view, therefore, the cupboard was nearly bare of local resources; from a British army point of view nothing was available locally. ¹

As the greatest needs of the Greeks were supplies and transport vehicles, an embarrassing situation developed when the convoys brought over hundreds of MT vehicles and the stores which were to be the ninety days' reserve. The obvious deduction was that the British should do more to support their allies. The military mission pleaded with **W Force** Headquarters, but the decision was that any assistance given to the Greeks at that time would be at the expense of British movements and reserves. In any case the volume of supplies necessary for any appreciable assistance to the fifteen ill-equipped Greek divisions would have been enormous.

The initial task was therefore limited to the formation of an organisation which could, within the next few weeks, maintain the units about the Aliakmon line—1 Armoured Brigade, 2 New Zealand and 6 Australian Divisions. After that the authorities had to prepare for the arrival of two more divisions and the possibility

¹ Brigadier G. S. Brunskill, 'The Campaign in Greece in 1941', *Army Quarterly*, April 1947.

of the whole force moving forward across Macedonia to support the Greeks along the frontier.

In making such preparations the Allied Command had to accept several very unpleasant facts. Salonika could be bombed from airfields in Bulgaria; ships could not clear the port and be out of fighter-bomber range before daylight; the railway from Salonika to Edhessa could easily be cut if the enemy turned the Metaxas line; and the railway centre at Katerini, though close to Salonika, was forward of the Aliakmon line.

The maintenance of the right flank of the Greek Army in Albania and of the forces along the Aliakmon line had therefore to be from the port of Piræus and the minor port of Volos. From Piræus a standard-gauge railway line ran north, with one branch line going north-west to the romantic monastery town of Kalabaka and another, with a metre gauge, coming in from Volos to Larisa, the key town of Thessaly. From there the main line went through the Pinios Gorge and up the coast to Katerini and Salonika.

The main highway was typical of a country with limited finances and considerable coastal shipping. Some stretches were not tar sealed, others could not take two lanes of traffic. In the mountains there were formidable hairpin bends and sections which could be badly iced and often blocked with snow. Several of the bridges were limited to one-way traffic; all of them could easily be damaged by enemy bombers; and

because the distance between **Piræus** and the base at **Larisa** was some 200 miles, a large number of motor vehicles had always to be on the road.

The only advantage in the system was that the highway ran north-west to **Larisa**, to **Kozani** and on to the **Monastir Gap** directly behind the whole length of the **Aliakmon** line. The roads which branched off eastwards were consequently the supply lines for the troops who were defending the more accessible passes. D Company 26 Battalion,¹ above the **Platamon** tunnel, was guarding the approaches to an ancient and now third-grade road which went through the **Pinios Gorge**; the rest of the New Zealand Division covered the entrance to **Olympus Pass** and the second-class road to **Larisa**; 6 Australian Division was taking over the defences of the **Veroia** Pass by which the main highway crossed from **Kozani** to **Veroia**; north of that again, another road, the responsibility of 20 Greek Division, went over the mountains from **Florina** to **Edhessa**.

These mountain roads were usually well graded, but they were narrow and in bad weather not always suitable for heavy motor traffic. The tracks branching off from them may have been good enough in summer, but in March and April the frequent showers

¹ On 9 April 21 Battalion took over the defence of this area.

often made them impassable for motor vehicles. 'The ox-wagon, horsed-wagon, pack transport and bridle path still predominated.'¹

To make the problem still more difficult, the units which had been trained to handle supplies were not sent over to **Greece** in time to prepare for the reception of the convoys of supply ships. Like many New Zealand formations the supply groups were often sent over in different flights and forced to wait several days for staff, vehicles and equipment to be complete. The result was temporary congestion and confusion about the depot on the **Athens** racecourse and along the sidings at **Larisa**. In time, however, there were field supply depots at **Livadhion**,

Servia and Kozani and forward dumps at Katerini, Veroia, Edhessa and Amindaion.

First Armoured Brigade which went into the Macedonian Plain was supplied from the field supply depots at Veroia and Edhessa. The New Zealand Division in its sector was supplied by a daily pack train from Athens to Katerini, where the first-line transport of most units picked up their supplies. These arrangements left 4 NZ RMT Company and 1 and 2 RMT Companies of the Royal Army Service Corps free to work from the Advanced Base at Larisa establishing the field supply depots. Later, when 6 Australian Division came north, the pack train to the New Zealand Division was continued and the other troops in the line were supplied from the field supply depots ² at Servia and Kozani.

¹ CRME 1514, Engineer Report No. 2, 15 March 1941, Appendix A.

² The FSD at Livadhion was classed as a reserve.

TO GREECE

AIR SUPPORT

Air Support

The last and most serious problem was that of air cover. At the **Athens** conference on 22 February the British representatives had stated that the strength of **BARBARITY** Force could by 15 April be increased from four to fourteen squadrons.³ This was an optimistic but possibly justifiable statement. The convoys from **Britain** were bringing new aircraft and the campaign in **Cyrenaica** was progressing so favourably that squadrons could soon be sent from there to **Greece**. Since then, however, it had been impossible to arrange the transfer. Between 1 January and 31 March 1941 the British losses in the **Middle East** had totalled 184 aircraft, the replacements only 166. The arrival of the *Luftwaffe* and the *Afrika Korps* had inevitably postponed the transfer of any squadron. And their sudden counter-attack in the first week of April had now made it inevitable 'that air reinforcements would have to be sent to **Cyrenaica** immediately to prevent the enemy thrust from developing into a serious threat to Egypt.'⁴

³ Air Vice-Marshal J. H. D'Albiac's report, para. 15.

⁴ Air Marshal Sir A. Longmore's despatch, para. 19.

The result was that on 6 April, when **Germany** declared war on **Greece**, the Allied air strength was lamentably weak. Only eight (excluding an army co-operation squadron) of the fourteen promised squadrons had reached **Greece**; only about eighty aircraft were available to challenge a German Air Force of possibly 800 aircraft¹ supported by an Italian force of about 300. The Greeks could give little or no assistance. Their small air force had been sacrificed in the early stages of the Italian war. Since then further losses and a serious lack of spare

parts had reduced its efforts to negligible proportions. If British or American aircraft were available the force would certainly be reequipped, but until that was possible its efforts were 'of little operational value.'²

The **Royal Air Force** had consequently to operate on two fronts. The two squadrons of the Western Wing were supporting the Greeks in **Albania**; the four squadrons of the Eastern Wing had to assist the Allied forces in **Macedonia**; the other three squadrons, with support from bomber squadrons during the full-moon periods, operated from the airfields about **Athens**. They fought magnificently but the task allotted to them was quite impossible. As early as 18 March Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac reported that 'Owing to the small numbers of **RAF** squadrons that can be made available, the lack of suitable aerodromes in this country and the fact that we will have to fight on two fronts, it will be apparent that the air support which can be provided at any rate for some time to come will be far below that considered necessary for the efficient conduct of war....'³

The Eastern Wing, whose activities were of more immediate interest to **W Force**, had one fighter squadron operating from **Larisa**, **Blenheim** squadrons at **Almiros** and Niamata, and an army co-operation squadron at Ambelon. They had to work under operational difficulties that would have kept many units on the ground—the weather and the risks of mountain flying, the inaccurate maps, the obsolete aircraft such as **Blenheims**, the shortage of airfields and the problems of maintenance. For those Allied soldiers who wondered why they saw so few aircraft of the **Royal Air Force**, these notes about the difficulties of the one army co-operation squadron in **Greece** may be some explanation:

'Unfortunately, however, this squadron rarely had more than one **Hurricane** serviceable at a time and, since the remainder of its

¹ The only order of battle for *VIII Corps* available for **Crete** shows a total of 650 aircraft.

² Memorandum on Air Policy, **Greece**, Appendix A to report by Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac.

³ *Ibid.*, Appendix B, para. 19.

aircraft were Lysanders, which it was quite impossible to use in the face of enemy air opposition, the squadron did very little useful work.' ¹

'As this squadron had three Hurricanes and ten Lysanders, nobody was enthused, as we all, especially the pilots, knew that the "Lizzies" would be death-traps even as communication aircraft, and this proved to be the case.' ²

¹ Memorandum on Air Policy, **Greece**, para. 33.

² Air Vice-Marshal A. S. G. Lee, *Special Duties*, p. 71.

TO GREECE

FINAL ADJUSTMENTS TO THE ALLIED LINE

Final Adjustments to the Allied Line

Over and above these problems of air cover and supply there were the last-minute changes which had to be made in the defence lines, especially after Wilson and Papagos had decided ³ on 4 April that **W Force** would not move forward of the Aliakmon line for at least eight days. Wilson had then done his best to strengthen the forces already in the **Amindaion** area. On 5 April Brigadier Lee was sent over from **1 Australian Corps** to control the British units in that area. Sixty-fourth Medium Regiment (less one troop in **Veroia** Pass) moved in and established its headquarters at Kelli; **1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment**, which had landed at **Piræus** on 3 April, was hurried north; and a pioneer unit was detailed for work about **Amindaion**.

The same day General Kotulas suggested that **12 Greek Division** should be relieved immediately by **6 Australian Division** and sent to assist **20 Greek Division** in the defence of **Edhessa** Pass and the mountainous left flank of the line. As General Wilson did not wish the Australians to begin the changeover before the arrival of the **GOC 6 Australian Division**, he repeated that the greater part of the line would certainly be taken over within the next eight days. ⁴ The Australians would be responsible for all the line then held by **12 Greek Division**, except for the mountainous left flank, where two Greek battalions would be left as their maintenance problems would be more simple than those of Australian units. The defence of the gap still existing between the **New Zealand Division** and **12 Greek Division** would have to be arranged by the Australian and New Zealand divisions.

Later that day, 5 April, General Wilson officially took over the command of the Allied forces in central **Macedonia**; General Blamey, who opened his headquarters at **Yerania**, a hill village just south of **Servia Pass**, took command of all British, Australian and New Zealand

troops.

The same day General I. G. Mackay, GOC 6 Australian Division, received his orders. One brigade would relieve the Greeks in **Veroia Pass**. Another would go to the **Kozani** area to reinforce the troops in the pass or the **Amindaion** detachment south of the **Monastir Gap**. And the third would be in reserve near **Servia**; from there it could assist the brigade to the north or the New Zealanders about **Mount Olympus**. The difficulty was to put the orders into immediate operation. Two battalions of 19 Brigade were on their way up from **Athens** and 17 Brigade was with the seventh flight. Only 16 Brigade, then about **Servia Pass**, was in its allotted area. Wilson and Papagos, well informed as to the movements of the German divisions in **Bulgaria**, had therefore to change their plans. On 6 April 16 Brigade received fresh orders and within twenty-four hours was taking over from 12 Greek Division the positions in **Veroia Pass**.

³ See p. 134.

⁴ 16 Brigade Group arrived by 22 March; 19 Brigade Group by 3 April; 17 Brigade Group was in transit with the seventh flight when **Germany** declared war against **Greece** on 6 April.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 8 – THE GERMANS INVADE GREECE

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TO GREECE

HITLER PREPARES HIS PLANS

Hitler Prepares His Plans

IN November 1940 **Hitler** had told Mussolini that without safeguards from **Yugoslavia** no successful operation was possible in the **Balkans**. Months had therefore been spent trying to persuade her to join the Tripartite Alliance. Although **Yugoslavia** declined his 'invitations', **Hitler** remained confident that he could control the situation. On 13 December he issued his directions for the occupation of northern **Greece**; on 22 March 1941, as a result of British support to **Greece**, he had to order the occupation of the whole country. And, as a reward for his persistence, **Yugoslavia**, on 25 March, adhered to the Tripartite Pact.

The overthrow of the Yugoslav Government by a military *coup d'état* on 27 March was therefore a threat to German security in the **Balkans**. Mr. Churchill had visions ¹ of a **Balkan** front and General Papagos suggested ² that the British should move forward from the Aliakmon to the Metaxas line.

To **Hitler** it was a complete surprise: 'The Yugoslav *coup* came suddenly out of the blue. When the news was brought to me on the morning of the 27th I thought it was a joke.' ³ Well aware that the British position was now stronger he acted swiftly, determined that there should be no threats to his flank and rear when he attacked either **Greece** or **Russia**. The German High Command was hurriedly assembled and told that **Yugoslavia** must be destroyed 'militarily and as a national unit.' ⁴ She had to be attacked with such 'unmerciful harshness' and such 'lightning-like' speed that **Turkey** would remain inactive and the way be cleared in the southern provinces for an additional thrust into **Greece** which, like **Yugoslavia**, had to be overwhelmed in the shortest possible time.

To bring this about he decided to use ten more divisions in the

Balkan campaign, bringing the total up to twenty-eight, of which twenty-four had already been detailed for service in **Russia**. Among them there were, however, seven of his nineteen panzer divisions and three of his twelve motorised divisions, all essential if his

¹ See p. 115.

² See p. 134.

³ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 144.

⁴ Ibid. Quotation from minutes of the meeting of the **German High Command**.

generals were to employ on the plains of **Russia** the principles of mechanised warfare. If they were used in **Greece** it would be impossible because of the limited railway system of the **Balkans** to transfer these divisions to the Russian front in less than two months. He had therefore to tell his Commanders-in-Chief that, 'The beginning of Operation Barbarossa will have to be postponed up to four weeks as a result of the **Balkan** operations.' ¹

That night, 27–28 March, the orders for the campaign in **Yugoslavia** were drawn up and changes made in the plans for the attack upon **Greece**. On 6 April both **Greece** and **Yugoslavia** would be attacked. In the north-west the Italian *Second Army* could at least cover the border of **Italy** and **Yugoslavia**. *Second Army* (Field Marshal Weichs) would strike south from **Austria** into **Yugoslavia**. The Hungarians would move in to occupy the Banat, their 'lost province' to the north-west of Belgrade.

Twelfth Army ² (Field Marshal List), which was now assembled in **Rumania** and **Bulgaria**, would attack both **Greece** and **Yugoslavia**. *Thirtieth Corps* ³ would deal with the Greek divisions in eastern **Macedonia**. *Eighteenth Corps* ⁴ would attack the Metaxas line, one force

clearing the **Rupel Pass** and another entering **Yugoslavia** by the **Strumitsa Pass** and then turning swiftly south past Lake Doiran. They would then cross the Macedonian Plain, taking **Salonika** and threatening the Aliakmon line.

The other three formations of **12 Army** would strike westwards into **Yugoslavia**. The capital, Belgrade, was the objective for two of them: **XXXI Corps**,⁵ which would move south-west from Temesvar in **Rumania**, and **Panzer Group 1**,⁶ which would strike north-west along the main highway from Sofia. The third and most southern was **XXXX Corps**,⁷ whose orders were to move in two columns to Skoplje and Veles in the Vardar valley, thereby cutting the main line of communications between **Salonika** and Belgrade. Their next task was to thrust westwards until they had linked up with the Italians at the northern end of Lake Ochrida. They would then have prevented any attack by the Yugoslavs upon the Italian flank and prevented that concerted action by the Allies which Eden and Dill had, so patiently, been attempting to arrange. Moreover, it would also be possible for Field Marshal List to switch some divisions south through **Monastir** towards **Amindaion**, **Kozani** and **Larisa**. This thrust to the rear of the

¹ N.D. 1746 PS.

² Two panzer, one motorised, one mountain and six infantry divisions.

³ *164 Inf Div, 50 Inf Div.*

⁴ *2 Pz Div, 2 Mtn Div, 6 Mtn Div, 72 Inf Div, 125 Inf Div, 12 Army flak, artillery and engineer formations.*

⁵ *SS Div Reich, Inf Regt 'Grossdeutschland', Brigade 'Hermann Goering'.*

⁶ HQ Staff, *XI and XIV Corps, 5 Pz Div, 11 Pz Div, 60 Mot Div, 4 Mtn Div, 198 Inf Div.*

⁷ *9 Pz Div, SS 'Adolf Hitler' Div, 73 Inf Div.*

Aliakmon line by *XXXX Corps* and that across the Macedonian Plain by *XVIII Corps* were those which were most directly to concern the New Zealand Division.

TO GREECE

THE INVASION OF GREECE AND YUGOSLAVIA, 6-8 APRIL

The Invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia, 6-8 April

At first light on 6 April the German armies invaded **Greece** and **Yugoslavia** and the *Luftwaffe* began an intensive bombardment of Belgrade. In the north **2 Army** had one corps in Zagreb, the capital of **Croatia**, on the 11th and another outside Belgrade on the 12th, when it was occupied by *Panzer Group 1*, which had been sent north through Nish and down the Morava valley from **12 Army** in **Bulgaria**. On the Adriatic side, **2 Italian Army** coming through the Julian Alps paraded down the coast to join the force already in **Albania**.

The efforts of **12 Army** in northern **Greece** were equally spectacular. *Thirtieth Corps* after some bitter fighting broke through the eastern end of the Metaxas line and then divided, **50 Division** turning west towards **Salonika** and **164 Division** turning eastwards to Alexandroupolis and Kavalla, from where in fishing craft, a German steamer and two Italian destroyers its units occupied the islands of Samothrace, Thasos, Lemnos, Mytilene and Chios.

The central sector of the Metaxas line was assaulted by *XVIII Corps*. In the **Rupel Pass**, where the Strimon River comes through the mountains, the Greeks held out valiantly for several days, but **2 Panzer Division** turned the line by making a wide circling movement westwards through the **Strumitsa Pass** into **Yugoslavia** and thence southwards down the Vardar (Axios) valley into Macedonia. The move was a complete success for by 9 April the armoured units were racing through the almost undefended country and preparing to take over the port of **Salonika**.

In the north-west *XXXX Corps* had sent two groups into **Yugoslavia**. The first, **9 Panzer Division** and the SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division, went through the pass at Kriva Palanka and in the evening of 7 April were at

Skoplje, some 60 miles beyond the border. The second, *73 Division*, had crossed the border farther south by way of the pass at Carevo-Selo and was at Veles, another town in the upper Vardar valley. Next day, 8 April, the group to the north occupied important centres about Skoplje; the other, swinging south and maintaining the attack, sent its motorised advanced guard into the key town of Prilep. From here the force could turn west again to link up with the Italians or, more important still, it could continue on its southern course towards the **Monastir Gap, thereby threatening to encircle the Greeks in **Albania** and **W Force** in the **Florina- Edhessa- Katerini** area.**

TO GREECE

GENERAL WILSON'S DEFENCE PLANS ON 6 APRIL

General Wilson's Defence Plans on 6 April

The rapidity of the German advance gave General Wilson only four days, 6–9 April, to adjust his defences. Moreover, it was difficult for him to make the swift decisions which the situation demanded. He had always to consider the wishes of General Papagos and, until the worst was known, to allow for the stubborn resistance which the Yugoslavs were confidently expected to provide. Consequently, when General Blamey sent his senior staff officer to press for 'an immediate withdrawal of the New Zealand division to the passes' in accordance with the agreement ¹ reached in **Athens** twelve days before, Wilson was not prepared, at least on the first day, to make such an important decision. Until more was known of the fighting along the border, **W Force** would work according to the original plans.

In the **Veroia** Pass sector the replacement of 12 Greek Division by 16 Australian Brigade would probably take place on the night of 7–8 April. The New Zealanders would complete their defences along the anti-tank ditch to the north of **Katerini**, but they were warned that their withdrawal to **Mount Olympus** would begin as soon as **1 Australian Corps** could maintain troops in the sector to the north. They could, however, detach units to prepare the defences about the pass. Orders were therefore issued for the withdrawal of 22 Battalion ² from the **Katerini** to the **Mount Olympus** area and for the transfer of 21 Battalion ³ from **Athens** to the southern extremity above the **Platamon** tunnel.

The records of the conference also suggest that the chances of a forced withdrawal were already beginning to worry General Wilson. He spoke of orders for the withdrawal of Greek troops from eastern **Macedonia** to the **Mount Olympus** area, and mentioned a Greek division in reserve which could be used in the **Servia- Yerania- Elasson** area as the basis of a second line which would run from the **Mount Olympus** line

northwards to the Pieria River and the sector held by the Greeks.

The discussion ended with General Wilson obviously and naturally waiting for more detailed intelligence reports. Late that night he learnt that the Greeks still held the **Rupel Pass** in the Metaxas line, that German columns were rushing westwards across **Yugoslavia** to the Vardar valley, and that another was approaching the Strumica Pass, from which it could enter the lower Vardar (Axios) valley and edge round the Metaxas line towards **Salonika**.

To complete the disturbing survey, news had just been received that **7 Australian Division** and the **Polish Brigade** would not be sent over to **Greece**. On 31 March Rommel had counter-attacked in **Cyrenaica**, recovering **Benghazi** and surrounding **Tobruk**. General Wavell had thereupon ordered **18 Brigade of 7 Division** to be embarked and sent round to strengthen the defence of that port. The **Polish Brigade** and the remainder of **7 Division** would remain in Egypt in readiness for service in North Africa.

¹ See pp. 135– 6.

² See p. 254.

³ See pp. 173– 7.

TO GREECE

THE RAID ON PIRÆUS HARBOUR

The Raid on Piræus Harbour

For the units in the **Athens** area action began about 11 p.m. on 6 April when the *Luftwaffe* began a two hours' bombardment of the crowded harbour of **Piræus**. The cruiser *Ajax* and the anti-aircraft cruiser *Calcutta* put to sea, but the SS *Clan Fraser* carrying ammunition was hit and exploded at four o'clock next morning. The damage was terrific. Sheds and offices, equipment and rolling stock were wrecked; six merchant ships, twenty lighters and one tug were burnt out and another ship sunk by an aerial mine. The port was closed for two days for clearing and reorganisation, but the damage to the facilities for unloading was a problem for the rest of the campaign. This meant that the shipping programme had to be adjusted and efforts made to use such minor ports up the east coast as **Khalkis**, **Stilis** and **Volos**. The 292nd Army Field Company, **Royal Engineers**, which should have gone north to assist in the preparation of the defences at **Amindaion**, was retained to clear the shattered waterfront and a troop of 2/106 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery needed to cover the base at **Larisa** was retained for service about the harbour.

Several small New Zealand units were in **Piræus** during the raid, the largest being A Company (Captain **McClymont** ¹) of 21 Battalion, with the mortar platoon under command. No. 7 Platoon (Lieutenant **Southworth** ²), guarding the Shell and Socony oil installations about a mile from the docks, did its best with Bren and Lewis guns. No. 9 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant **Roach** ³) was about the main wharf where bombs released by an early flight set fire to the sheds, the ammunition trucks and the *Clan Fraser*. Until other flights came over and the men were ordered into air-raid shelters, wounded seamen were assisted off the ship and efforts made to control the fires about the docks. In the morning when the ship exploded the men were under cover in the air-

raid shelters so there were only two minor casualties, perhaps the Division's first in

¹ **Capt R. B. McClymont**; born Rongotea, 30 Aug 1906; public servant; killed in action 22 May 1941.

² **Lt W. J. Southworth**, m.i.d.; born **Christchurch**, 30 May 1918; school-teacher; killed in action 22 May 1941.

³ **Maj W. J. G. Roach**, MC; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 12 Oct 1909; bank officer; 2 i/c **21 Bn** Oct 1943–Mar 1944; wounded 22 Nov 1941.

Greece. ‘The main trouble was not exactly the blast but the bloody big pieces of red hot metal which came out of the sky. Some of them were 6 ft in length ... the amn piles started going up ... and to cap it all the amn train caught alight and there were anxious moments while we smothered that.... An English senior officer then put in an appearance—he was a very grand chap but as I told him everything that was likely to happen had happened.’ ¹

Another unit was No. 3 Section 9 Railway Survey Company ² (Captain Nevins) which was on PAD ³ duties and able to assist in the suppression of fires on the decks of two ships. Next morning men from the Reinforcement Camp at **Voula** were on the scene when a small ship struck one of the aerial mines and broke in half. Two of the seamen who were struggling in the oil-coated harbour were brought in at great risk by Private **Coatsworth** ⁴ of 20 Battalion.

¹ Major Roach.

² See pp. 91– 2.

³ Passive Air Defence.

⁴ **Pte F. J. C. Coatsworth**; born NZ 5 Sep 1918; plumber; p.w. Apr 1941; died while p.w. 10 Aug 1942.

TO GREECE

THE ALLIED LINE IS CHANGED

The Allied Line is Changed

The following day, 7 April, was wet, with difficult flying conditions which prevented systematic reconnaissance by the Royal Air Force. The reports from the fighting line could have been more detailed, but as the hours passed it became clear that the Germans were about to stage another dramatic success. In the extreme east they were forcing their way to the **Aegean Sea**; the Greek troops in the **Rupel Pass** were still fighting back but the regiments in the Beles area were giving way; and, most serious of all, the Yugoslavs still farther west were withdrawing up the Strumica valley.

In **Albania** the Greeks had certainly struck out towards Durazzo but the Yugoslavs, who were to launch a supporting offensive from the north, were at first weak and, in the end, quite ineffective. This failure, together with the succession of disasters in **Yugoslavia** itself, was a warning that the Allies would probably have to create defences between **W Force** about **Amindaion** and the Greek armies in **Albania**.

In the eastern sector the Allied commanders were now convinced that a shorter front must be prepared. During the morning Generals Blamey and Mackay visited **General Freyberg** and were shown the defences which had been prepared by 4 and 6 NZ Brigade Groups. Blamey was impressed by the strength of the position along the anti-tank ditch, but he still held to his original opinion ⁵ that the brigades should be withdrawn to the passes about Mount **Olympus**. The decision was made that afternoon when General Wilson came up to discuss the problem. 'It was decided that we should go back as quickly as possible and hold the line of the passes.' ¹ In other words, all British troops would be withdrawn from the plain of **Macedonia**: the New Zealand brigades from the **Katerini** area and 1 Armoured Brigade from the **Edhessa** sector.

No other decision was possible but it was going to be a costly withdrawal. The New Zealanders, after wasting a month preparing the line, would have to leave a large proportion of their wire and mines alongside the anti-tank ditch. By evacuating **Katerini**, **Veroia** and **Edhessa** the Allied armies were creating most serious problems of communication. **W Force**, without the railhead at **Katerini**, would have to be supplied by motor transport from **Larisa**. The **Western Macedonian Army**, whose supply line had been the railway from **Salonika** to **Edhessa** and to **Florina** would, in future, have its supplies brought up the long, narrow valley from **Larisa** to **Grevena** and **Kastoria**. That in turn would make it essential for the **Amindaion** detachment to halt any German advance from the direction of **Monastir** and **Florina**. Otherwise it would be possible for the enemy not only to thrust south towards **Larisa** but also to break through the Western passes and cut the supply line to the **Western Macedonian Army**.

⁵ See p. 135.

¹ NZ Division 'G' diary.

TO GREECE

NO GREEK UNIT CAN BE TRANSPORTED FROM THE METAXAS LINE

No Greek Unit can be Transported from the Metaxas Line

That evening, 7–8 April, General Wilson had an interview with General Papagos. Just what the latest information was at this time it is now impossible to decide, but it is reasonable to assume that Wilson was told that, although some of the Greek forts in the **Rupel Pass** were holding out, the Germans were pressing down the Strimon valley. The report from one Greek source was that the Yugoslavs were falling back in disorder. This was quite correct. *Second Panzer Division*, supported by a motorised *Mountain Rifle Battalion*, had taken Strumica and then turned south down the Vardar valley to the Greek border at Devdelija and Lake Doiran. Advanced Headquarters **W Force** had, however, been told that the Yugoslavs were holding the pass at Kosturino between Strumica and Valandovo but needed the assistance of **W Force**. As the situation stood it was impossible to provide such support.

In any case the Greeks, well aware of the weakness of their position in eastern **Macedonia**, were now asking for British transport to bring out some of their regiments from the Bulgarian border to join **W Force**. The position was already hopeless but General Wilson, anxious to make some gesture, gave orders that fifty motor vehicles from 1 Armoured Brigade should be sent forthwith to assist the Eastern Macedonian Army. ‘This column actually started, but before it had got any distance the advancing Germans had got between them and their destination, and they were turned back.’¹ Next morning it was too late; all units of that army were in contact with the enemy and quite unable to pull out of the line.

¹ Report on supply and transport services, **Greece**, para. 27.

TO GREECE

THE NEW ZEALANDERS AND AUSTRALIANS CONTINUE TO PREPARE THEIR POSITIONS

The New Zealanders and Australians Continue to Prepare Their Positions

There were few other movements forward that day, 7 April, from the lines of **W Force**. All units were too busy preparing their positions. Headquarters New Zealand Division issued no orders for the withdrawal of the brigades from the plain, but particular attention was given to the positions of 5 Brigade about **Mount Olympus**. No. 4 Section 19 Army Troops Company was sent to work on the road within the pass, Headquarters New Zealand Artillery continued to reconnoitre alternative positions within the area and 7 Field Company New Zealand Engineers, when it arrived at **Katerini**, was immediately sent back through the mountains to assist in the preparation of the road from **Kokkinoplos** to the rear of 23 Battalion.

Farther north 16 Australian Brigade was beginning to move into the **Veroia** Pass sector. The battalions, straight from their campaign in the **Western Desert**, had now to adjust themselves to the rocks and snow of positions astride the mountain road which edged its way over the 3000-foot pass.

Still farther north on the plain to the east of the **Edhessa** Gap, 1 Armoured Brigade waited for the advancing German columns and consequently was eager to obtain information of any enemy movements. The attached troops (Lieutenant A. C. Atchison) from the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry**² were therefore patrolling east of **Edhessa** to the **Axios** River and as far north as **Apsalos**.

On the other side of the mountains in the **Amindaion** sector along the border of **Yugoslavia** the detachment commanded by Brigadier Lee was preparing alternative defences. Sixty-fourth Medium Regiment,

Royal Artillery, had new positions near Filotas, 27 NZ (Machine Gun) Battalion was still in the Palaistra- Lofoi area, but since the German advance on 6 April reconnaissances had been made of gun positions some ten miles to the south. And reinforcements were on their way: 580 Army Troops Company, Royal Engineers, was coming up from Athens; 1 Australian Anti- Tank Regiment (less a battery south of Kozani) was under orders to go to Amindaion.

² See pp. 140– 1.

TO GREECE

THE ALLIED COMMANDERS DECIDE TO WITHDRAW

The Allied Commanders Decide to Withdraw

The intelligence reports received on the morning of 8 April were most discouraging. The Metaxas line, in parts, was still intact but German regiments were almost clear of the **Rupel Pass**. Others had outflanked the western end of the line and were striking southwards towards **Salonika**, one column between Lake Doiran and the Axios River and another down the western bank of the river towards Ghevgheli. The only units in their path were one and a half battalions of 19 Greek Motorised Division, whose original sector to the east of the lake had been extended the previous night to include the threatened roads to the west. The resistance they could offer was so slight that General Papagos had earnestly requested the transfer of 1 Armoured Brigade from the **Edhessa** area to the anti-tank obstacles that were being prepared in the Axios valley.

This would have been a desperate and ineffective change of plans. The information coming in throughout the day made it quite clear that Yugoslav resistance had cracked on all fronts and that the British forces along the line of the passes were now likely to be encircled. A patrol from General Headquarters Liaison Squadron reported that Yugoslav resistance to the north of **Monastir** was practically at an end; the town was almost empty and some of the Yugoslav General Staff were already over the border into **Florina**. The patrol could do no more than arrange for the demolition of the main bridge over the Crna to the north of **Monastir** and shepherd the withdrawal of three Yugoslav tanks and four anti-aircraft guns. The way was therefore clear for the German units now approaching Prilep to rush south and, by nightfall, enter **Monastir**. From there they could strike south to Amindaion, **Kozani** and **Larisa**, thereby outflanking the defences which had been built up to hold the passes behind **Edhessa**, **Veroia** and **Katerini**.

General Wilson discussed ¹ the situation with General Blamey at Headquarters **1 Australian Corps** and decided how **W Force** could be used to meet the emergency. 'In order to stop a blitzkrieg' down the **Monastir-Florina Gap** and to give **W Force** time to

¹ This discussion led to the following operation orders: **1 Aust Corps Op Instr No. 4**, issued at 1 p.m., 8 April; instructions to **1 Armoured Brigade** were telephoned between 1.35 p.m. and 2.35 p.m.; **General Freyberg** received his orders that afternoon and **NZ Div Op Instr No. 4** was issued at 6 p.m., 8 April; **W Gp Op Instr No. 9** appeared at 12.35 a.m., 9 April, and **No. 10** in the evening of the same day.

organise its main defences, a temporary or intermediate line would immediately be prepared.

At the southern edge of the gap was **Klidhi Pass** in the **Amindaion** area. It would be held by a force ¹ under the command of Major-General **I. G. Mackay**, who would be directly responsible to Headquarters **W Force**. Within it there would be the original **Amindaion** detachment, including **27 MG Battalion**, **6 Australian Division less 16 Brigade** in the **Veroia Pass**, **64 Medium Regiment**, **1 Armoured Brigade** and an engineer company. The Australian battalions would move up to the pass as they became available; the armoured brigade then dealing with demolitions in the **Macedonian Plain** would withdraw that night and then come under command.

In the **Vermion Range** to the east and south of **Amindaion** would be **20 Greek Division**, ² south of it would be several units of **12 Greek Division**, whose replacement by **6 Australian Division** would now be discontinued; **Veroia Pass** would still be held by **16 Australian Brigade**; and in the extreme south the **New Zealand Division** would hold the sector from **Mount Olympus** to the **Aegean**.

No date could as yet be given for the withdrawal from this intermediate line, but it had to be held long enough for the creation of a

more permanent one which would run north from the **Mount Olympus** sector to the **Aliakmon River** and thence along the south bank to the mountains west of **Servia**, where it would link up with the **Western Macedonian Army**. The dumping of supplies to the north of the river had naturally to be stopped, the back lifting of existing depots was considered and General Blamey was instructed to prepare for the occupation of the Aliakmon positions.

The pivot on which the eventual withdrawal from the north could be based would be 4 New Zealand Brigade, which was placed under the command of 1 **Australian Corps** and warned that it would be withdrawn³ from the **Katerini** sector to the upper stretches of the **Aliakmon River** near the township of **Servia**.

At the same time Headquarters New Zealand Division was told that its 6 Brigade would also be withdrawn from the anti-tank ditch north of **Katerini** to support 5 Brigade about **Olympus Pass** or for movement to some other sector. The **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and E Troop 5 Field Regiment, the only units to be left in

¹ See 1 Aust Corps Op Instr No. 4.

² General Wilson met General Kotulas that afternoon at **Kozani** and arranged for the withdrawal of this division from the **Kaimakchalan** sector north of **Edhessa** Pass to the gap on the right flank between **Mackay Force** and Mount Vermion.

³ See pp. 171– 3.

the plain between **Mount Olympus** and the Aliakmon, had to be prepared for a swift withdrawal in their own vehicles.

The curious feature of all these decisions is that the urgency of the situation had forced Wilson to act without consulting Papagos, whose orders were not received until 7.50 p.m. on 8 April. His instructions,

however, were almost the same as those issued by General Wilson. There would be a co-ordinated front running north from **Mount Olympus** over the **Aliakmon River** to Mount Vermion, and thence westwards across the **Monastir Gap** to Mount Vernon. The western boundary for **W Force** would include Ammokhorion and Nimfaion; the country beyond that would be the responsibility of the **Western Macedonian Army**. He also suggested that the reserves of **Mackay Force** be brought forward to assist in the defence of the gap. 'In order to gain time for the installation of this line', he suggested that 1 Armoured Brigade should be advancing towards **Monastir** to make contact with the advancing enemy and 'to hinder his advance as much as possible.'¹ General Wilson preferred, however, to assemble the brigade as a reserve force to the south of **Amindaion**.

In any case his plans were already under way. The orders for **Mackay Force** to assemble had been given at 1 p.m. on 8 April and those for **W Force** as a whole were about to be issued. The first set issued at 12.35 a.m., 9 April, stated that there was imminent danger of a German thrust into **Greece** by way of the **Monastir- Florina** Gap. The organisation of the intermediate or temporary line was then given in detail: about **Amindaion** there was Mackay Force; to the east and south-east there were the Greeks, **20 Division** and part of **12 Division**, under General Kotulas; and south of them were 16 Australian Brigade and the New Zealand Division, all under the command of General Blamey.

Later in the day General Papagos informed General Wilson that the Yugoslavs in Veles had surrendered and that the highway from there to **Monastir** was undefended. His offensive in **Albania** would therefore be stopped and more troops transferred to hold the central sector about **Florina**. Unless this was done the German divisions, when they came through from **Monastir**, could not only continue south from **Florina** towards **Amindaion** and **Kozani** but also westwards through the mountains in the rear of the Western Macedonian Army.

To counter such a threat Papagos had already, on the night of 7-8 April, moved his **Cavalry Division** to the gap between the left flank of **W Force** about **Amindaion** and the right wing of the **Western Macedonian**

¹ **British Military Mission to Advanced HQ, 8 Apr 1941.**

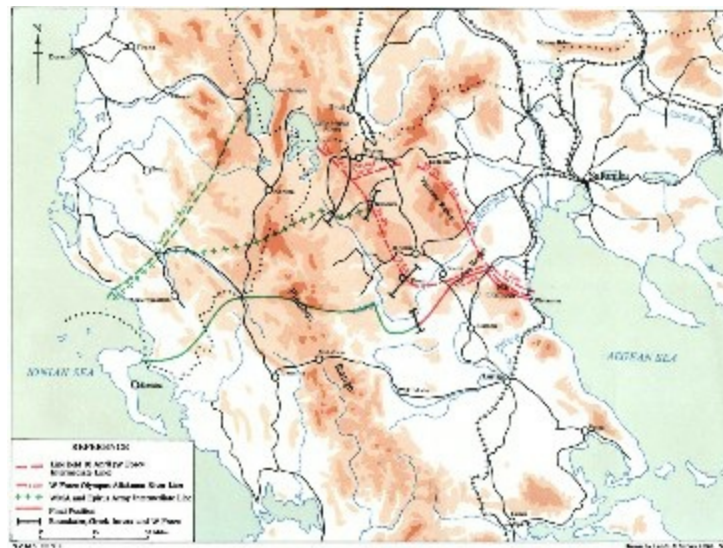
the **Pisodherion Pass** through which the Germans, if they reached **Florina**, could strike west to Koritza or south-west to Kastoria, the key towns along the Greek line of retreat. On 8–9 April he took further steps to strengthen his right flank: 21 Infantry Brigade was sent to the Nimfaion- **Xynon Neron** sector between the pass and the left flank of **Mackay Force**; 13 Infantry Division was moved to the north of the pass between Lakes Megali Prespa and Ochrida. W Force and the Greek armies thereafter held, according to the map, a continuous line from the Aegean to the Adriatic.

If this line could be held even for a few days the British in their valley could prepare the defences about **Servia** and the Greeks could withdraw to reorganise their Central and Western Macedonian Armies. The **Central Macedonian Army (20 Division** and part of **12 Division)** would be switched from the Vermion Range on the right flank of **Mackay Force** to the passes in the mountains along the left flank. This was a hazardous undertaking for it meant that the divisions would be moving across the valley which was the only line of withdrawal for **Mackay Force**. If all went well, however, the Greek armies would then be together and problems of supply and command would consequently be simplified.

The withdrawal of the **Western Macedonian Army**, even though it meant the abandonment of Greek gains in **Albania**, had always been an unpleasant possibility. As early as 7 March General Papagos had warned his sector commanders that they must plan in detail the withdrawal of their forces to a new and shorter line. The British would occupy and safeguard the sector from the coastal corridor east of **Mount Olympus** to the **Dheskati** bend of the Aliakmon River. The Greek forces of the Western and Central Macedonian Armies would hold a line from the bend

to Mount Vasilitsa, and the forces in the Epirus sector would extend the front westwards to the Ionian Sea. Since this warning order had been issued the Germans had broken through the Metaxas line and were overrunning **Yugoslavia**. So, although the Yugoslavs still declared their determination to continue the struggle, it was almost certain that Papagos would soon have to withdraw his armies from **Albania** and central **Macedonia**.

This was made quite clear in the second and more detailed set of orders ¹ issued on 9 April by Headquarters **W Force**. In them it was explained that the defence of the **Kozani- Florina** gap was only an 'interim arrangement ... a prelude to future development.' The first task for **W Force** was to hold its present positions in order to gain time for 'i. our allies to adjust their dispositions incl forces in **Albania**. ii. organisation of a rearward defensive position'



Planned Positions, 11-14 April 1941

¹ W Group Force Instruction No. 10, 9 April.

which would run north from the **Mount Olympus** sector to Rimnion and thence westwards through **Servia** and along the south bank of the **Aliakmon River** to the **Grevena** area. No estimate could be given of the period of time for which this line should be held but a withdrawal might

be necessary at very short notice. Readjustments were being made to ensure the defence of the passes about [Mount Olympus](#) and to create a reserve in the [Servia](#) area, but it was emphasised that the passes to the east must be held at all costs until the Greeks and 6 Australian Division had withdrawn from the northern sectors.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL BEGINS ON 8 APRIL: 1 ARMoured BRIGADE

The Withdrawal Begins on 8 April: 1 Armoured Brigade

The information received by Headquarters **W Force** during the morning of 8 April was not comprehensive but it was reliable enough to justify the decision to withdraw to the new defences. Eastern **Macedonia** was about to be overrun, two German columns were rushing south towards **Salonika** and another was about to move through the **Monastir Gap** towards **Florina**, **Amindaion**, and the rear of the British, Australian and New Zealand forces.

The units in greatest danger were those of 1 Armoured Brigade north of the **Aliakmon River** between **Edhessa** and the Axios River. The original orders for the day had been that they should defend **Edhessa**, but in the afternoon the brigade was instructed to retire through the **Edhessa** and **Veroia** passes to the **Perdikha** area south of **Amindaion**. The demolitions in each pass would be blown that night.

Fourth Hussars, to which was attached Lieutenant Cole's troop of New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry**, sent its B Echelon back through **Edhessa** and prepared to cover the withdrawal of the brigade. The weather had cleared by the late afternoon and enemy reconnaissance aircraft were circling over the plain but there was little, if any, bombing or strafing. The rearguard detachments were free to observe the approach of the German armour, to blow the bridge over the Axios River and to move back to the **Yidha** area, where the bridges were blown after the last tank crossed shortly after midnight. The last stage of the withdrawal through **Veroia** Pass to **Kozani** and then north to **Perdikha** was accomplished without incident.

The main body of 1 Armoured Brigade had a more exciting withdrawal. The bad weather of the last two days had made the roads on the eastern side of Lake Vegorritis so difficult for motor transport that

the convoys were sent along the road to the north and west of the lake, a route that was unpleasantly close to the **Monastir** area through which the Germans were expected to advance. Time was therefore important and the withdrawal had some resemblance to a race, with 20 Greek Division on the way south from Kaimakchalan jamming the track with its pack transport. The Germans, however, were still some distance away so there was no interference and the brigade was through the **Klidhi Pass** and south of **Amindaion** by the early hours of 9 April.

The troop from the **Divisional Cavalry** was to the rear of the column. In the afternoon it had been sent back against the stream of Greek infantry and refugees until it was two or three miles into the pass to the north of the village of Ardhea. From there it eventually returned to its base some 18 miles out of **Edhessa** and joined up with a platoon from **1 Rangers**. Having no orders, Lieutenant Atchison left his three armoured cars and went back to **Edhessa**, where he learnt that the brigade was pulling out and that his troop was 'to follow them if possible.'¹ He had then to rush back the long 18 miles to collect his troop and the platoon of riflemen. Five minutes after his return they were on the road; they caught up with the main column about midnight and went on with it to **Perdikha**.

On the south side of the **Aliakmon River** there was as yet no corresponding withdrawal by the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and the attached troop of artillery. Throughout the day they had heard explosions across the bay from **Salonika**, the stream of refugees across the bridges had grown still more dense and as dusk came on columns of smoke rose from the oil stocks set on fire by the Canadian **Kent Corps**.² At 9 p.m. all the bridges except the main traffic one were demolished, with the sound echoing in the hills above the plain.

The orders from Headquarters New Zealand Division had been for its immediate destruction but Major **Potter**,³ Officer Commanding A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry**, had postponed the demolition because Brigadier Charrington had been anxious about the withdrawal of his

armoured brigade. He had wanted the bridge left intact until he was certain that all his brigade had been able to withdraw westwards through the passes. Moreover, the seven cruiser tanks which had been exchanged for the two troops ⁴ of C Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment were somewhere on their way south towards the river. To locate them and to guide them over the river two officers were sent forward while a strong party from A Squadron formed a screen on the north side of the bridge. After midnight the news came through that 1 Armoured Brigade was safely into the mountains and soon afterwards the cruiser tanks made their way over the bridge. At 4 a.m. on 9 April it was demolished and the temporary wooden structure beside it was pulled down by A Squadron vehicles, assisted by the cruiser tanks. Each of the four gun detachments of O Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery was now supported by one of the tanks, the **Divisional Cavalry** headquarters still expecting that they would have to delay the crossing of the river and fight a series of withdrawal actions until they could retire through the anti-tank defences now manned by 4 and 6 Brigades to the north of **Katerini**.

¹ Lt Atchison.

² A commando party controlled by the British Military Mission.

³ Lt-Col J. F. Potter, VD; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 19 Jul 1891; school-teacher; CO 1 Armd Regt, RNZAC, Mar 1944–Nov 1948.

⁴ See p. 141.

TO GREECE

FOURTH BRIGADE GROUP IS WITHDRAWN

Fourth Brigade Group is Withdrawn

The decision to withdraw 4 and 6 Brigades to the slopes of **Mount Olympus** had been made ¹ during the afternoon of 7 April, but the written orders for the move were not received until the following day, by which time **General Freyberg** had already instructed 26 Battalion to leave its position on the ridge overlooking the anti-tank ditch. Less D Company at the **Platamon** tunnel and the carrier platoons which would remain in the area, the battalion would move back to the road junction at the foot of **Olympus Pass** preparatory to constructing lines for 6 Brigade on the left of 5 Brigade. The companies moved out that afternoon in heavy rain, marching 12 miles along the clay roads before they were taken by motor transport to the Sanatorium area near the foot of the pass. Here they received different orders. Some were detailed to control the stream of motor vehicles, gun limbers and Greek refugees with mules and carts; others were sent back into the pass to prepare the tracks by which the artillery could take its guns off from the main highway.

The sector vacated by the battalion was now held by two platoons from 24 Battalion, one platoon from 25 Battalion and 26 Battalion carrier platoon, all under the command of Major **George**, ² with 4 Machine Gun Company ³ under command.

In the same period between the decision to withdraw to the passes and the receipt of instructions from General Blamey, there had been tentative plans for the withdrawal of 4 Brigade and 6 Field Regiment to a line below the pass, through which 6 Brigade with 4 and 5 Field Regiments could retire after making contact with the advancing Germans.

¹ See p. 163.

² Lt-Col C. D. A. George, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 9 Mar 1906; draper; CO 25 Bn Dec 1941–Jul 1942; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped, Italy, Sep 1943.

³ This company remained in the 22 Battalion area.

On 8 April, however, very different orders were received from General Blamey. The New Zealand Division which General Freyberg had been attempting to keep together as one force was to be split far more widely than before. Fourth Brigade, with supporting artillery and engineers, would retire forthwith through the mountains and go north to Serbia, where it would, as Corps reserve, occupy the vital sector ¹ of a new line that was being built up along the Olympus Range and the upper Aliakmon River. The other units of the Division, less the outer screen of Divisional Cavalry, would prepare to withdraw to Olympus Pass.

That night, 8–9 April, the artillery with the 4 Brigade Group began its withdrawal, 6 Field Regiment pulling out over the rain-soaked tracks and roads to the western side of the pass, where it camped for the night. Next morning it moved north to the southern end of Serbia Pass and sent out reconnaissance parties to look for gun positions. Thirty-first Anti-Tank Battery should have withdrawn that night but clear orders were not received in time. However, B Troop returned that night from 6 Brigade and the whole battery was able to assemble at Ay Ioannis, from which it moved next morning to join the main convoy.

Eighteenth, 19 and 20 Battalions had the night of 8–9 April in which to make their preparations before marching to an assembly area just north of Katerini. The unit transport took all equipment of immediate importance; anything else was left under guard until arrangements could be made for transportation. In the early hours of 9 April, with the sky to the north-east now red with the flames from the demolitions in

Salonika, they left the anti-tank ditch, the gun positions and the wire entanglements which they had taken so much trouble to prepare. From the assembly area where they were joined by 1 Section 6 Field Company and 31 Anti-Tank Battery, the battalions were taken over the mountains and north to **Servia Pass** in the trucks of the Divisional Supply Column and the Divisional Petrol Company.

Once there the brigade group ² was to have gone to a bivouac area, but at Kato Filippaioi the column was ordered to proceed immediately to positions about the pass. Instructions in greater detail had already been given to Brigadier Puttick, who had driven ahead of his brigade and reported at Headquarters Australian Corps at **Yerania**. In order to prevent any sudden penetration from the north his brigade, with one battalion in reserve, would take up a defensive position along the line **Kastania-Servia- Prosilion**. It had to be held at all costs because through it units from the north

¹ See p. 166.

² 4 Bde with 6 Fd Regt, sec 6 Fd Coy, 31 A-Tk Bty and 5 Fd Amb.

would eventually withdraw. So, with this definite assignment, the brigade group continued on its way.

TO GREECE

21 BATTALION MOVES UP FROM ATHENS TO THE PLATAMON TUNNEL

21 Battalion Moves up from Athens to the Platamon Tunnel

The other unit on the move during the night of 8–9 April was 21 Battalion, now released from guard duties about **Piræus**. Its movement north to **Katerini** had been suggested by General Wilson during the conference ¹ on the morning of 6 April, so that very night, shortly after the bombing of **Piræus**, Colonel Macky received his orders from **80 Base Sub-area**. The B Echelon transport, with the anti-aircraft platoon for protection, thereupon moved off during the morning of 8 April; the companies in railway cattle trucks left that afternoon and reached **Larisa** about midday on 9 April.

By then the decision had been made to withdraw the New Zealand brigades from the **Katerini** area to the passes about Mount **Olympus**. Twenty-first Battalion, instead of joining 5 Brigade, would take over the defences which D Company 26 Battalion had been preparing above the **Platamon** tunnel. Consequently, when the train reached **Larisa** Colonel Macky was told by the Railway Transport Officer that the battalion would detrain at the tunnel, some 15 miles away.

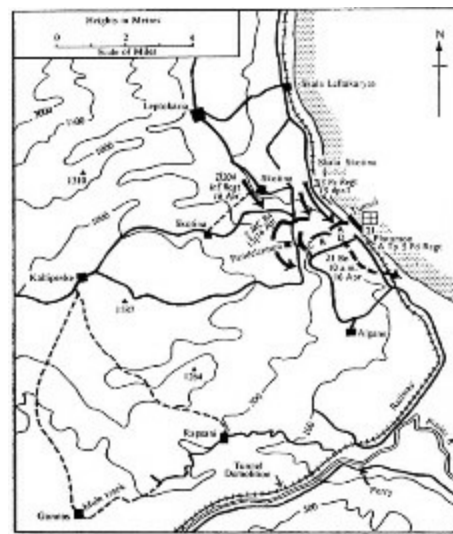
In that stretch the train stopped three times: twice in sidings to allow trains bearing Greek troops to come south and once because the engine crew took to the hills, until they were certain that an air battle overhead was not the prelude to an attack by dive-bombers. Naturally enough it was late afternoon when the companies detrained just south of the tunnel. No definite orders had as yet come through, but Captain Huggins, who was already there with his company from 26 Battalion, had certainly been preparing the position for a battalion. Colonel Macky therefore decided that he was expected to take over the defences. A Company was sent to **Castle Hill**, B Company to Point 266 and C and D Companies were meantime kept in reserve.

Later in the night a section of engineers from 19 Army Troops Company (**Lieutenant F. W. O. Jones** ²) and A Troop 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment (Lieutenant **Williams** ³) drove in from **Katerini** to come under command of the battalion. Now that the Division was withdrawing to the passes the engineers, with explosives, land mines and one naval depth-charge, had to prepare for the demolition of the tunnel.

¹ See p. 160.

² **Capt F. W. O. Jones; Wellington; born Wellington, 14 Sep 1911; civil engineer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

³ **Capt L. G. Williams, m.i.d.; Silverstream; born Christchurch, 2 Jun 1909; draughtsman; wounded and p.w. 22 May 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.**



21 BATTALION AT PLATAMON, 14-16 APRIL 1941

Next morning, 10 April, a message came through from **General Freyberg** stating that the battalion would hold the sector and mentioning that only infantry attacks need be expected as the terrain was too rough for tanks. This advice is surprising. The original report ¹ from the GSO III (Intelligence) had certainly suggested that vehicles

could use this coastal route, and only a few hours before the supporting troops from **Katerini** had brought their trucks and guns across the main ridge. The explanation probably is that General Wilson had repeated to **General Freyberg** his earlier statement ² that the main attack would be made in one of the passes to the north.

¹ See p. 146.

² See p. 135.

Later in the day more detailed instructions were received from Brigadier Hargest. The battalion would complete the defences according to the prepared plan; it had to deny the approaches to the gap, watch for landings along the coast to the south and defend **Castle Hill** and **Hill 266**. If either of them were captured there had to be an immediate counter-attack; there would be 'NO retirement.'

The ridge certainly had many advantages. Any Germans advancing south from **Katerini** would have very little cover. With the sea cliffs on one side and the apparently inaccessible ridges of **Mount Olympus** on the other, there were few chances of an outflanking movement. The communications to the rear were reasonably good; the artillery had the choice of several excellent gun positions. But there was one weakness which could be exploited by a resolute enemy. The ridge, apart from some clear patches about the castle and **Pandeleimon**, was heavily timbered from the beach at **Platamon** to the snowfields on **Mount Olympus**. And such conditions, as time was soon to show, were ideal for those German regiments which had been trained for mountain warfare and a policy of infiltration.

In the meantime the companies after a wet night in the open had occupied the ridge from the sea cliffs to the lower slopes of **Mount Olympus**. On the extreme right in the A Company sector (Captain R. B. McClymont) the crest of the ridge was bare, but its northern face was

cloaked with bay trees, oleanders and a few scattered **Aleppo** pines. The romantic feature was the Frankish castle with its relatively sound outer walls and its crumbling central tower, from which the plain looked like a great isosceles triangle cut by the road and the railway and studded, in the foreground, with olive and mulberry trees, prickly pears and blackberries and, as the soil grew richer, with fields of maize, tobacco and cotton about white farmhouses set in groves of oaks and plane trees.

B Company (Captain Le **Lievre** ¹) was higher up the ridge and forward of Hill 266, a neat cone which broke the gradual incline of the ridge and created on either side a natural track for any attacking force. At this height shrubs flourished along the crest and limited the field of fire from all section positions.

To the left again, some 1500 feet above the sea, was C Company (Captain **Tongue** ²) in the belt of oaks, beeches and chestnuts about **Pandeleimon**, a small village at the junction of three
impor-

¹ Lt-Col C. A. Le **Lievre**; **Whakatane**; born **Akaroa**, 16 Nov 1891; farmer; Wgtn Regt 1915–19; coy comd **21 Bn** 1940–41; p.w. Apr 1941.

² Capt **W. M. Tongue**, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 22 Jun 1908; funeral director; p.w. 29 Nov 1941.

tant

mule tracks. One ran south-west to **Gonnos**, a village which overlooked the **Larisa** end of the Vale of **Tempe**; another branched south to the railway station; and yet another swung in to the rear of B Company.

Behind this line and to the south of **Castle Hill**, D Company (Captain **Trousdale**, MC ¹) was in reserve; Headquarters 21 Battalion was behind the castle; the mortar platoon was nearby; the carrier platoon patrolled

the coast from the tunnel to the Pinios River and endeavoured to check the refugees that were being brought over by coastal ships from **Salonika**.

The supporting arms under command remained near the coast. The troop from 5 Field Regiment sited its 25-pounders about 500 yards to the south of the **Platamon** railway station in pits beneath some willow trees. The section from 19 Army Troops Company left the tunnel open to traffic but did its best to prepare for its demolition, the main charges, 350 pounds of gelignite and the depth-charge, being placed in a safety bay near the centre of the tunnel and sandbagged in to increase the force of the blast. At each end of the tunnel charges were laid so that the rails could be cut and the approaches cratered; and in the A Company area demolitions were placed on the track to the north of Point 266 and an anti-tank minefield was laid out across the front of No. 9 Platoon.

D Company 26 Battalion left the pass for **Katerini** by train during the night of 12–13 April. To its surprise the town was almost empty; the only New Zealanders to be seen were the patrols ² of the **Divisional Cavalry** which had withdrawn from the Aliakmon River before the advancing Germans. However, with the assistance of the Greek general in the area, Captain Huggins was able to communicate with Headquarters New Zealand Division, on whose instructions the company at 2 a.m. boarded another train and returned through the tunnel and the **Pinios Gorge** to **Larisa**, where transport from the battalion was waiting to take it to Ay Dhimitrios in the **Olympus Pass** area. En route the company was diverted northward, 26 Battalion having been moved to the west of **Servia Pass**, and it was not until 9 a.m. on 14 April that it rejoined the unit in the Rimnion area.

By then the defences about the **Platamon** tunnel had been more firmly established. Two signalmen from A Section Divisional Signals had appeared with a No. 11 wireless set; Major **Harding**, ³ second-in-command of the battalion, with a small train—one engine

¹ **Lt-Col A. C. Trousdale, MC; Howick, Auckland; born Canada, 20 Oct 1895; estate agent; comd 1 Bn, North Auckland Regt, Aug 1942–Jul 1943; CO 21 Bn 21 Jun–9 Jul 1944; comd Freyberg Wing, Reception Gp (UK) 1944–45; wounded 22 Nov 1941.**

² **See p. 236– 7.**

³ **Lt-Col E. A. Harding, MC; Dargaville; born Dargaville, 4 Dec 1893; farmer; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (OC 5 (Res) Bn); actg CO 21 Bn 20 Apr–17 May 1941.**

and four trucks—was delivering rations and ammunition; any loose money there was about the battalion had been collected to purchase some mules to carry supplies from the tunnel to the gun positions up the mountainside. And to encourage the companies in the preparation of the defences, Greek civilians and stragglers from the army were still trailing through from Macedonia, tired, wet and dejected.

TO GREECE

WITHDRAWALS AND ADJUSTMENTS DURING 9-10 APRIL

Withdrawals and Adjustments during 9-10 April

The refugees were just another proof of the collapse of the Allied defences along the border of **Greece** and **Bulgaria**. According to the latest reports the Germans now controlled the greater part of eastern **Macedonia**. Their forward screen was moving from **Khilkis** towards **Yiannitsa**; the Greeks were certainly holding some of the forts of the **Metaxas** line but German motorised columns were now through the **Rupel Pass**; **Salonika** had been occupied and the attack switched westwards towards the **Axios River**. **Sixteenth Australian Brigade** had therefore destroyed the bridge at **Veroia** and all bridges between **Yiannitsa** and **Edhessa**.

In the north towards the border of **Yugoslavia** a stream of equally pathetic refugees was moving through the lines of the **Amindaion** detachment in **Klidhi Pass**, for the unexpected collapse of **Yugoslavia** had left the way clear for a German advance southwards to the **Monastir Gap**. It is surprising that they were not already beyond that town and across the border towards **Florina**. Apparently they had been held up by the wretched roads of southern **Yugoslavia**, by the problems of an extended supply line and the adjustments necessary now that the attack was being directed southwards into **Greece** as well as westwards towards **Albania**.

The next two days, 9–10 April, were therefore free for the withdrawal and adjustment of those units of **W Force** which were still on the plain of **Macedonia**. South of the **Aliakmon River** the forward **New Zealand** unit was the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**. In the original orders the squadrons were to have fought a series of delaying actions, but the latest instructions from **General Freyberg** were that the regiment was to make contact with the enemy along the line of the river and then retire to **Olympus Pass** without becoming seriously involved. The elaborate plans

for a fighting withdrawal were therefore shelved.

To the rear of the **Divisional Cavalry** the withdrawal which had begun on the night of 8–9 April was now at its peak. On 9 April Headquarters New Zealand Division, leaving an advanced headquarters at **Sfendhami**, retired over the pass to **Dholikhi**, where within the next twenty-four hours it was joined by the headquarters of the Artillery, Engineers and **Army Service Corps**.

To prepare the way for 4 and 5 Field Regiments the Survey Troop had left that morning, 9 April, to establish bearing pickets in the **Olympus Pass** sector. The troop arrived in the **Ay Dhimitrios** area to find that the only existing survey data consisted of the co-ordinates of three trig points so high up the mountainsides that it took two and a half hours to reach one of them. Rain that day and snow on 10 April prevented further high-level observations, but trig stations were erected at lower levels and calculations made from them.

The reconnaissances for gun positions in the pass had already been made. Fifth Field Regiment to cover the right flank and centre had to place one battery on the west side of the pass opposite Headquarters 5 Brigade and the other on the same side of the road but farther up the pass. Fourth Field Regiment, covering the left flank, had to place one battery beyond that again and the other still higher up the pass, almost at the village of **Ay Dhimitrios**. The guns were to be thinned out gradually from the plain so that there would be some cover along the front for 6 Brigade when it withdrew from the coastal sector. The ammunition left by 6 Field Regiment after its move to **Servia Pass** was taken back to the foot of **Olympus Pass** for the use of the other two regiments; the ammunition from these two units was collected and taken to the railhead at **Katerini**.

Movement began during the late afternoon of 6 April when RHQ 4 Field Regiment with 25 Battery and RHQ 5 Field Regiment with 28 Battery (less E Troop with the **Divisional Cavalry**) withdrew into the pass, moving slowly because of wet roads and heavy streams of traffic.

In the evening Headquarters New Zealand Artillery moved back to **Dholikhi**, Brigadier Miles and two officers remaining at **Sfendhami** as advanced headquarters. Twenty-sixth Battery 4 Field Regiment withdrew before midnight and 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment (less A Troop with 21 Battalion) left at 2.15 p.m. on 10 April, some time after the withdrawal¹ of 6 Brigade had begun. Miles was then free to retire to **Dholikhi**.

Thirty-second Anti-Tank Battery and 4 Company 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion also withdrew to the pass on 10 April, both units coming under command of 5 Brigade.

The group most heavily employed during this period of withdrawal—if such distinctions are possible when all units were working their hardest—was that of the **Army Service Corps**. To allow for the rearrangement of the Division in the shortest possible time,

¹ See pp. 181–4.

stores had to be lifted and new dumps established. In the **Katerini** area this was the responsibility of No. 2 Echelon¹ of 1 Supply Column which controlled No. 4 Field Supply Depot at Neon **Keramidhi**.

The orders for the evacuation of the depot were received on 9 April, so once the normal issue for the day was sent out Lieutenant **McIndoe**² and his Supply Details³ set about the movement of some 1000 tons of stores—96,000 gallons of petrol and 300,000 rations. Supplies for ten days were dumped for 5 Brigade at the foot of the pass and thirteen days' rations were railed to 21 Battalion at the **Platamon** tunnel, but the major task was the transfer of the rest of the stores from the depot to the railhead at **Katerini** for transportation to the **Larisa** area. Some twenty-four load-carriers from No. 1 Echelon which had not been wanted for the movement of 4 Brigade were available during the day, but thereafter No. 2 Echelon laboured alone.

The work continued that night and throughout 10 April until 4 p.m.,

when heavy rain made it impossible to use the sidings. By that time the hands of many men were skinned or blistered, but when the rain ceased during the night work recommenced and continued until midday on 11 April. Then, after dealing with such minor problems as the despatch of four lorries to collect tents left in the lines of 4 Brigade and to provide stores for the Divisional Cavalry on the **Aliakmon River**, Headquarters No. 2 Echelon withdrew over **Olympus Pass** to join No. 1 Echelon which, except for the Supply Details who had remained with Captain **Jacobs**⁴ at No. 1 Field Supply Depot, had been transferred from **Larisa** to an area just south of **Elasson**. The maintenance of the New Zealand units holding **Olympus Pass** was now a task of No. 1 Field Supply Depot. To simplify the problem Lieutenant McIndoe, with a detachment from No. 2 Echelon, established a Detail Issue Depot, the stores of which were to be invaluable during the final withdrawal.

The other unit of the New Zealand **Army Service Corps** to assist in the withdrawal was the Ammunition Company, which had been working for **81 Base Sub-area** at **Larisa**. On 8 April the crews were sent back over **Olympus Pass** to **Katerini** to pick up its normal G1098⁵ holding. The crumbling road and the difficulties of driving

¹ No. 1 Echelon (Captain G. A. Hook) had its Supply Details (Captain H. M. Jacobs) stocking 1 Field Supply Depot, RASC, some 25 miles from the railhead at **Larisa**.

² **Capt J. L. McIndoe**, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 18 Nov 1898; printer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³ Two operation sections were absent at **Larisa** helping to stock Nos. 1 and 5 Field Supply Depots.

⁴ **Capt H. M. Jacobs**; Dunedin; born NZ 17 Nov 1909; tobacconist.

⁵ See p. 81, note 3.

without lights over the mountain range brought the spare drivers out on the running boards to give directions, and even forced some drivers to remove their windscreens and endure the evil weather. After it had unloaded at **Dholikhi** the company crossed again on 10 April to pick ¹ up some of 24 and 25 Battalions and to salvage MT stores from Gannokhora. Next day the Officer Commanding, Major **McGuire**, ² returned with a convoy to salvage stores and supplies left by 6 Brigade in the Aliakmon line. While in that area those drivers not needed for the stores had two urgent tasks. They had to repair and metal the crossing by which the AFVs of the **Divisional Cavalry** were to withdraw across the anti-tank ditch and bring back from **Aiyinion** a supply of machinery and MT stores, particularly some spring steel, which would otherwise have been left to the enemy.

Next day, 12 April, the company had still another urgent task in the withdrawal. The lorries were sent from the base at **Dholikhi** to the forward area at **Amindaion** ³ just before the Germans broke through the **Klidhi Pass**. The petrol dump the company was to lift was six miles south of **Amindaion**, but the convoy by some error went into and out of the village just as the shelling began. Then, when the dump was found and the petrol lifted, spare rations were added to the loads and the crews were given a free hand with any luxuries. So far as can be ascertained this was the first of many occasions during the withdrawal from **Greece** that the ration dumps were more or less given to the ranks. That concession enjoyed, the company moved south with the retreating transport of **Mackay Force** and dumped the petrol at the southern side of **Servia Pass** for 6 Australian Division and 4 New Zealand Brigade.

With all this movement on the roads the Divisional Engineers had still more work to do. Headquarters, after checking the demolitions and arranging for the withdrawal of supplies, withdrew during the night, 9–10 April, to **Dholikhi**. The same night 5 Field Park Company moved back over the pass to a site near **Kokkinoplos**, from which it issued and transported RE supplies and provided detachments to help in the

preparation of demolitions on the forward approaches to the pass.

In the pass itself the road, sodden with melting snow and jammed with trucks, guns, refugees and farm stock, was now crumbling and demanding constant attention. Its maintenance became the responsibility of 19 Army Troops Company. No. 1

¹ See p. 183.

² Lt-Col W. A. T. McGuire, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 22 Dec 1905; police officer and motor engineer; OC Amn Coy Oct 1939–Oct 1941; OC NZ Base ASC 1941–44.

³ See pp. 204– 8.

Section ¹ had been sent to assist 21 Battalion in the Platamon tunnel and since 8 April Headquarters had been at Pithion, but the other three sections were given tasks about the pass: No. 2 at Ay Dhimitrios, No. 3 at Tsaritsani and, after 7 April, No. 4 about the crest of the pass.

The removal of any vehicles that were likely to hold up the endless stream of traffic was the responsibility of the recovery team from the Divisional Workshops. The main body of that unit, after closing on 8 April and sending any vehicles that could not be immediately repaired to the railhead at Katerini, pulled back over the pass during the night of 9–10 April to an area near Kato Filippaioi.

The servicing arrangements for the Division were then reorganised. In addition to a British ordnance field park which had been attached at Katerini, two independent brigade workshops were now working with the Division. Each of the three workshops was then allocated a section of the Ordnance Field Park and units of the Division were grouped ² for servicing under the direction of ADOS, Major Andrews, and DADOS (E), Captain Kelsey. ³

The medical units also moved during the night of 9–10 April, 4 Field Ambulance withdrawing from the plain and taking over next morning from 5 Field Ambulance, which moved forward to support ⁴ 4 Brigade in the **Servia** area. Thereafter 4 Field Ambulance had A Company near the crest of **Olympus Pass** at Ay Dhimitrios; Headquarters and B Company were at **Dholikhi** in charge of the Main Dressing Station vacated by the other company. With them there was 4 Field Hygiene Section, still supervising sanitation and enforcing precautions against malaria throughout the divisional area.

¹ See p. 173.

² 1 NZ Fd Wkshops, with B Sec Br Ord Fd Pk attached, served 6 Inf Bde, HQ NZE, **5 Fd Pk Coy**, **6 Fd Coy**, **7 Fd Coy**, 19 A Tps Coy, Div Cav, Div Sigs, Pro Coy, and Postal Unit.

2 Br Ind Bde Wkshops, with C Sec Br Ord Fd Pk attached, served 5 Inf Bde Gp, HQ NZA, 1 Svy Tp, 4 and 5 Fd Regts, 7 A-Tk Regt, and coys of 27 MG Bn.

5 Br Ind Bde Wkshops, with A Sec Br Ord Fd Pk attached in **Servia Pass**, served 4 Inf Bde Gp.

³ **Col J. O. Kelsey**, MBE, m.i.d.; born **New Plymouth**, 22 Nov 1904; sales manager and accountant; COME **2 NZEF** 1941–42; ADOS 1942–45; DDOS NZ Corps Feb–Mar 1944.

⁴ See pp. 184– 8.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL OF 6 BRIGADE

The Withdrawal of 6 Brigade

The withdrawal of 4 Brigade had taken place during the night of 8–9 April, but the movement orders for 6 Brigade were not issued by **Divisional Headquarters** until after midnight and, to complicate matters, the greater part of the next day had passed before Brigadier Barrowclough received his copy of them. The brigade had therefore continued to prepare its section of the line, but once it was learnt that 4 Brigade had already withdrawn, plans were prepared for 6 Brigade (less 26 Battalion) to move over **Olympus Pass**, ‘Date and time of the move ... uncertain.’¹ Until they were decided the position astride the highway would be held. As much surplus stores and motor transport as possible would be sent over the pass to **Dholikhi** and after the **Divisional Cavalry** had withdrawn the crossings over the anti-tank ditch would be blown. If the German armoured units did break through along the road the position would still have to be held until it was possible to arrange a night withdrawal. The tanks would then be less mobile, and if the flanks and rearguard provided adequate defence the infantry and transport could be withdrawn.

In the late afternoon, however, Brigadier Barrowclough was at last given a definite date for the withdrawal of his brigade group. That evening or the following day his units would withdraw to **Olympus Pass**. Well aware of the danger from air attacks during any daylight movement, the Brigadier immediately obtained permission to move his battalions to the embussing point that same night, 9–10 April.

The withdrawal of the 6 Brigade Group, instead of being a separate movement, thus became part of the general withdrawal which had been going on for the last forty-eight hours. The guns of 4 and 5 Field Regiments² which had been supporting the brigade had already been moving out that afternoon, but it was now decided that some from each

unit would be left in position to cover a wide front until the infantry had withdrawn. The platoons from 24 and 25 Battalions attached to **George Force** in the gap left by 26 Battalion were ordered to rejoin their units; 4 Machine Gun Company, which had been part of this composite force, reverted to the command of Headquarters New Zealand Division. Once in the pass it would, with 32 Anti-Tank Battery, come under the command of 5 Brigade. The new rearguard under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Duff was formed from the carrier platoons of the 24, 25 and 26 Battalions, supported by 3 Machine Gun Company and 34 Anti-Tank Battery.

So by 1 a.m. on 10 April the battalions were coming out along the tracks with orders to reach the area about Gannokhora before daylight and there lie up until the afternoon, when they would embus in the trucks of 4 RMT Company. Time being the essential factor, the 17-mile march had been undertaken at very short notice; in fact there was no meal before starting and nothing to eat during the night. 'That march would be remembered by most,

¹ 6 Brigade Group Instruction No. 1, 11.45 a.m., 9 April.

² NZ Divisional Artillery Operation Order No. 3, 8 April.

a few had had a couple of hours' sleep, no officers had slept at all and we plodded steadily along, stopping only 10 minutes in the hour.' ¹

Notwithstanding these disadvantages the march was performed in magnificent style, fully justifying the attention the Brigadier had given to long route marches during the training period in Egypt. The following afternoon the vehicles of 4 RMT Company appeared and the battalions were conveyed across the plain and into the pass, where the road twisted and turned, covering some ten miles and climbing over 3000 feet before it reached the crest and the village of **Ay Dhimitrios**.

Twenty-fifth Battalion and 33 Anti-Tank Battery were then taken

across the pass to the divisional area at **Dholikhi**, but Brigade Headquarters and 24 Battalion encamped on the southern slopes about two miles beyond the village. Here they were joined by 26 Battalion, which had that morning been ordered to leave the 5 Brigade area in which it had been working ever since its withdrawal ² on 8 April. The unit transport having been sent ahead, the men had walked to the crest of the pass—‘the most gruelling march to date’, 11 miles with a climb of 3000 feet. They arrived at dusk just when rain was about to fall. The B Echelon transport for the whole brigade was over the pass in the **Dholikhi** area with the greatcoats of some soldiers and the blankets of still more, so the two battalions in their tents among the shrubs shivered through the night of rain and snow.

The last unit of the brigade group to come over the pass was 6 Field Ambulance. A and B Companies, leaving an ambulance car with **Duff Force**, withdrew during the day to headquarters at **Kato Melia**, near the foot of the pass, and at 8 p.m. moved off again, ascending the pass and encamping just north of **Ay Dhimitrios**.

The screen along the anti-tank ditch had been provided by **Duff Force**. Headquarters, which had been organised just after midnight on 9–10 April, was formed from members of Headquarters 7 Anti-Tank Regiment and set up at Pal **Elevtherokhorion** with the unit wireless vehicles; 34 Anti-Tank Battery, less O Troop as yet with the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, was at the rendezvous; the carrier platoons from the battalions of 6 Brigade were patrolling across the front once held by the brigade; and 3 Machine Gun Company was in its original position. In the afternoon orders came through for the force to withdraw over the pass. Headquarters 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, with 34 Battery ³ now complete, went to the

¹ Report by Capt D. G. Morrison.

² See p. 171.

³ O Troop 34 Battery withdrew that day from its position with the **Divisional Cavalry** along the **Aliakmon River**.

Ay Dhimitrios area at the crest of the pass; 3 Machine Gun Company went through to the **Dholikhi** area, and the carrier platoons rejoined their respective battalions.

Thus by 4 p.m. the only New Zealand unit left on the plain was the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, with E Troop 5 Field Regiment, along the south bank of the **Aliakmon River**. **General Freyberg** thereupon closed his advanced headquarters at **Sfendhami** and moved back to **Dholikhi**.

TO GREECE

FOURTH BRIGADE GROUP

Fourth Brigade Group

In the **Servia Pass** area 10 April had been the day for deployment, not for withdrawals. The weather had cleared and the battalions could see the country which they were to hold. Hills some 4000–5000 feet high were immediately above them to the east and others equally high were away to the west. The five-mile front between the ranges sloped gradually across some two miles of very rough country and then ended in a precipitous escarpment with jagged arêtes and isolated pinnacles. At the base of this rock wall, unseen as yet, nestled the pretty market town of **Servia**, with plane trees in the square, vineyards on the terraces, and gardens flushed with blossoming plum and almond trees. Beyond it was the Aliakmon River and the long gradual incline up to the town of **Kozani**.

The crest of the escarpment was to be held with 18 Battalion on the right flank above **Servia**; 19 Battalion would be responsible for the country to the left on either side of the cutting through which the main highway went down the escarpment to the river valley. In reserve on either side of the highway to the south-west of Lava was 20 Battalion.

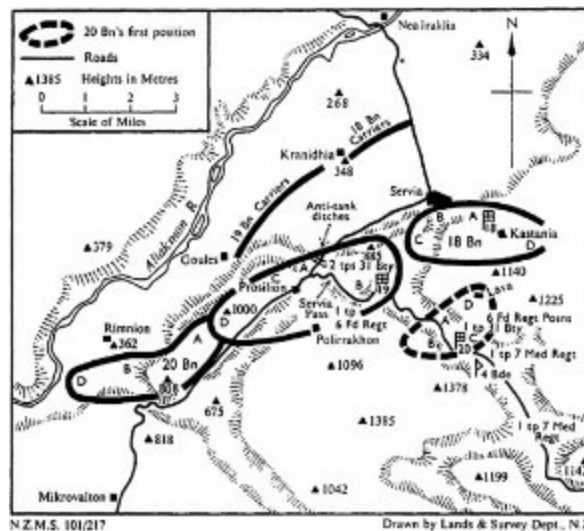
At 8.30 a.m. 18 Battalion picked up some of its equipment from the vehicles in Lava and began the first of several weary climbs up rain-soaked gullies and round steep rock faces to the company positions. The troops' one relief was the low mist that hung heavily about the hillsides and kept away the flights of German bombers. D Company (Captain **Sinclair**¹) went to the extreme right, south-east of **Kastania**, with one platoon well above the snow line. A Company (Captain **Kelleway**²) kept below the village in an area of rocky outcrops and thick undergrowth. The long ridge to the west and above **Servia** was left for B Company (Major **Evans**³) and C Company (Major **Lynch**⁴). To it there came up

¹ **Capt R. S. Sinclair; Te Awamutu; born Bellshill, Scotland, 22 Apr 1911; accountant; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

² **Capt C. T. Kelleway, ED; Hamilton; born Geelong, Aust., 15 May 1905; accountant; wounded May 1941.**

³ **Maj W. H. Evans, ED; born NZ 7 Mar 1899; schoolmaster; killed in action 24 May 1941.**

⁴ **Lt-Col R. J. Lynch, MC; born Waihi, 24 Oct 1909; sales manager; CO 18 Bn 29 Jun–15 Jul 1942; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942; died of wounds while p.w. 26 Sep 1942.**



4 BRIGADE POSITIONS AT THE SERVIA PASS, 10-17 APRIL 1941
4 BRIGADE POSITIONS AT THE SERVIA PASS, 10-17 APRIL 1941

from **Servia** a winding track that followed the eastern side of the narrow gorge which was one of the few faults in the long escarpment. Westwards again, the left flank extended up to and including the hilltop of Point 852.

Lieutenant-Colonel Gray left a rear headquarters in Lava and had his main headquarters in **Kastania**, a village on the right flank some 3000 feet above sea level and surrounded by oaks and pines. The view north-west across the river was a gunner's dream, for the main north road was

clear almost all the way from **Servia** to the bridge and for miles beyond that as it gradually ascended to **Kozani**.

There was, however, one serious disadvantage. The country between rear headquarters at Lava and the FDLs along the crest of the escarpment was incredibly eroded, with winding gullies and yellow-brown ridges, patches of scrub or, in the direction of Lava, groves of oak and pine. In New Zealand it would have been an area of abandoned sluicing claims. To reach their respective areas the companies had therefore to spend many hours following long circuitous tracks; and in the withdrawal which was eventually to take place this was to mean a most serious loss of time.

The escarpment to the left up to and beyond the main highway through **Servia Pass** was held by 19 Battalion. Some slight changes ¹ were afterwards made on 14–15 April but the positions taken over on 10 April were, in the main, those held by the battalion when the Germans attacked. B Company (Major **Gordon** ²) was in reserve well back from the pass and high enough for one platoon to be on the escarpment to prevent infiltration and to link up with 18 Battalion. A Company (Captain **Pleasants** ³) was at the foot of the gap and astride the road where it swung eastwards to round the base of the escarpment. This company was between the more forward of the three anti-tank ditches which the Greeks had constructed, with the precipitous escarpment on the right and a sharp dip into the gully on the left.

On the western side of the road the ridge continued with steep cliffs to the north and the village of **Prosilion** on the reverse slope. C Company (Captain **Bedding** ⁴) was to the north-west across the pass from A Company; D Company (Captain **Webster** ⁵) was to the south and south-west of the village.

In the open country between the foot of the escarpment and the **Aliakmon River** the carrier platoons of 18 and 19 Battalions patrolled to the villages of Kranidhia and Goules. Parachute attacks were possible, but it was more likely that the Germans would ford the **Aliakmon River**

and approach the pass under cover of the plane trees in the several gullies that ran down from the escarpment.

Twentieth Battalion was to the rear, in reserve and actually quite close to the crest of the pass, with D Company (Major **Paterson** ⁶) to the right in Lava, A Company (Captain **Washbourn** ⁷) astride the road, and B Company (Captain **Rice** ⁸) on the bald ridge

¹ See p. 272.

² **Maj R. K. Gordon**, ED; **Wanganui**; born Bulls, 19 Feb 1899; school-teacher; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

³ **Brig C. L. Pleasants**, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO **18 Bn** and Armd Regt Jul 1942–Mar 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep–Nov 1944; **5 Bde** Aug 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1945, May 1945–Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander, **Fiji Military Forces**, 1949–53; Commander, Northern Military District, 1953–57; Central Military District, 1957–.

⁴ **Maj T. G. Bedding**, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk); **Pauatahanui**; born Eketahuna, 18 Nov 1909; school physical instructor; p.w. 24 May 1941.

⁵ **Maj C. E. Webster**; born **London**, 19 Mar 1906; bank officer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁶ **Maj R. D. B. Paterson**, ED; **Dunedin**; born Dunedin, 20 Aug 1908; stock agent; 2 i/c **20 Bn** May 1941, Sep 1941–Apr 1942; Commandant, Southern District School of Instruction, **Burnham**, Jun 1942–Dec 1944.

⁷ **Maj G. W. Washbourn**; **Wellington**; born **Timaru**, 13 Jul 1916; bank clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; now **Regular Force**.

⁸ **Capt M. C. Rice, MBE; born Invercargill, 8 Jul 1904; company secretary; killed in action 22 May 1941.**

across the road to the west. C Company (Major **Wilson** ¹) was in reserve between Lava and the road.

To the rear again, on the southern side of the watershed, Brigade Headquarters was established. J Section **Divisional Signals** (Captain **Borman** ²) had no serious difficulty laying the telephone cable from there to 19 and 20 Battalions, even though it meant skirting the weathered hillsides and keeping clear of the road, which was certain to be bombed. The great problem was laying line across the gullies and up the heights to 18 Battalion, but it was complete by the night of 10–11 April and afterwards extended another five miles to bring 64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, into the brigade system.

In support of the brigade were several units of artillery under the overall command of Lieutenant-Colonel C. E. Weir. The anti-tank defence about the pass was the responsibility of 31 Anti-Tank Battery (Major **Blake** ³), two of whose troops came under the command of 19 Battalion and one under the command of 20 Battalion.

Sixth Field Regiment, with lines laid out across most difficult country, was in position by the night of 10–11 April in the valley south and west of Lava. Twenty-ninth Battery on the right was to support 18 Battalion; 30 Battery, less B Troop, to support 19 Battalion. B Troop had been placed farther forward, just south of the Borsana ridge to the east of the pass, to cover the bridge across the **Aliakmon River**. The observation points along the edge of the escarpment had ‘a wonderful field of view of a most extensive zone’; they were used by the Survey Troop after it was hurriedly brought over from **Olympus Pass** on 11–12 April.

Next day, 11 April, a battery of 7 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, came under command to provide counter-battery fire and to cover the

Aliakmon bridge. Both troops were placed well back at the southern end of the pass, the engineers plotting a 400-yard branch road and a Palestinian Labour Company, fresh from **Tobruk, completing the work.**

The section of 6 Field Company (Lieutenant **Kelsall ⁴) had fortunately come north with more than the normal demolition equipment. Weeks before it had taken over from the Naval Ordnance Stores at **Piræus** some twenty-three depth-charges, each containing 360 pounds of TNT. It had taken these treasures over the
moun-**

¹ **Maj C. Wilson**, m.i.d., MC (Gk); born England, 25 Aug 1907; insurance clerk; killed in action 21 May 1941.

² **Maj C. A. Borman**, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Upper Hutt; born Rangiora, 25 Jun 1906; public servant; coy comd Div Sigs Jul 1942–Dec 1943; G2 Sigs, Army HQ, May 1944–Jul 1945; OC Army Sigs Jul–Oct 1945.

³ **Lt-Col H. W. D. Blake**, m.i.d.; **Invercargill**; born **Christchurch**, 23 Jun 1903; schoolteacher; CO 17 Fd Regt, 3 NZ Div.

⁴ **Capt D. V. C. Kelsall**, m.i.d.; **London**; born **Taihape**, 13 Dec 1913; civil engineering student; p.w. 9 May 1941.

tains

to **Katerini, back again to the main highway and north to the **Servia** area, where they were to be the most effective road demolitions in the whole campaign. The destruction of the bridge over the **Aliakmon River** was a task for 580 Army Troops Company, Royal Engineers, but all demolitions from **Servia** to the pass and southwards towards **Elasson** were the responsibility of the New Zealanders. So next day, in spite of strafing and dive-bombing, the work began on the concrete bridge**

outside **Servia** and on the three anti-tank ditches along the road to the crest of the escarpment. Westwards from there along the road to **Prosilion** was another anti-tank ditch; southwards there was the highway to **Elevtherokhorion**, where the road came in from **Mount Olympus** and 5 Brigade. In all these places demolitions had to be prepared.

The medical unit with 4 Brigade Group was 5 Field Ambulance (Lieutenant-Colonel **Twigg** ¹), which had moved into position on 10 April and now had its Main Dressing Station some eight miles north of **Elevtherokhorion** on the lee side of a prominent hill. Three miles forward A Company (Major **Fisher** ²) established an Advanced Dressing Station and was immediately accepting patients, in spite of rain during the day and a snowfall during the night.

¹ **Brig J. M. Twigg**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Dunedin**, 13 Sep 1900; physician; CO **5 Fd Amb** Jul 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. Nov 1941; repatriated Apr 1942; ADMS 3 NZ Div Aug 1942–Apr 1943; DDMS **2 NZEF** (IP) Apr 1943–Aug 1944; ADMS **2 NZEF** (**UK**) Oct 1944–Feb 1946.

² **Col W. B. Fisher**, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born **New Plymouth**, 21 Jan 1898; Superintendent, **Waipukurau Hospital**; RMO 28 (Maori) Battalion Dec 1939–Aug 1940; 2 i/c 5 Fd Amb Aug 1940–May 1941; actg CO **6 Fd Amb** May 1941; CO 21 Lt Fd Amb (NZ) Nov 1941–Dec 1942; **6 Fd Amb** Feb 1943–Aug 1944; CO **1 Gen Hosp** Aug 1944–Feb 1945; died 17 Jan 1956.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 9 – THE MONASTIR GAP

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TO GREECE

THE ASSEMBLY OF MACKAY FORCE: 8-9 APRIL

The Assembly of Mackay Force: 8-9 April

IN the extreme north about **Amindaion** there was even more activity than at **Servia Pass**. On 8 April 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion had been about to move back ¹ from the forward slopes of the **Klidhi Pass** to positions at **Sotir** behind Headquarters Amindaion Detachment. In the afternoon the order was countermanded, probably because of the decision that **Mackay Force** in its effort to stop a blitzkrieg must defend the **Klidhi Pass** between **Monastir** and **Ptolemais**. The new gun positions had to be north of the 60 grid line, so Brigadier Lee and Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam together decided that they would be on the lower slopes of the high ridge to the east of Klidhi and thence south-westwards to the pass and across it to include the Mala Reka ridge.

The pass itself was not steep, but it was narrow and, except for the cultivated patches in a few re-entrants, was covered with thick scrub. The ridges on either side were nearly 3000 feet high, with a most extensive view across the bare, windswept plain. The road from **Edhessa** and **Salonika** came in from the east; another lined with poplars ran north-west towards the border and beyond it to **Monastir**, less than 20 miles away; and the railway line after coming through the pass swung away still farther west towards **Florina**. Away to the north were high mountains crested with snow and obscured by mists.

The machine-gun companies moved into position that night, 8-9 April. No. 2 Company (Captain **Robbie** ²) had 6 Platoon (Lieutenant **Liley** ³) about **Vevi**, 5 Platoon (Lieutenant **Newland** ⁴) and 4 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant **Hatton** ⁵) in the stretch from Klidhi across the hills to Point 1001 and beyond it to the

¹ See pp. 130- 1.

² **Lt-Col J. K. Robbie, ED; Nelson; born Christchurch, 5 Sep 1909; shipping and cargo clerk; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jul–Oct 1942, Apr–Sep 1943.**

³ **Capt W. F. Liley, MC; New Plymouth; born NZ 14 Mar 1915; cashier; GSO III (Int) 2 NZ Div 1942–43.**

⁴ **Maj C. A. Newland, m.i.d.; Masterton; born NZ 4 Jan 1913; meat grader.**

⁵ **Capt O. J. Hatton; Pahiatua; born NZ 29 Oct 1915; salesman.**

track between **Flambouron** and **Xynon Neron**. No. 1 Company (Captain **Grant** ¹) had its three platoons on features 807 and 852.

The British units adjusted their positions according to the new orders. A Squadron 3 Royal Tank Regiment moved to the **Sotir** area from which it could cover the southern approaches to the pass; the other squadrons remained to the south of **Amindaion**. Sixty-fourth Medium Regiment (less one troop) took up positions covering the whole front, with 211 Medium Battery south of **Vevi** and one troop of 234 Medium Battery in **Klidhi**.

Just before midnight General Mackay came up to the pass and immediately took over the organisation of its defence. The reinforcements which were moving into the area would be under the command of Brigadier G. A. Vasey of 19 Australian Infantry Brigade, two ² of whose battalions, 2/4 and 2/8, were now coming up from **Piraeus**. In the early morning, when the Armoured Brigade came through ³ from the Macedonian Plain, **1 Rangers** would come under Vasey's command; the other units of the brigade would carry on to **Perdikha** as Force Reserve.

The same night General Mackay had a conference with General **Karassos** ⁴ but because of language difficulties little was accomplished.

Arrangements were made for the headquarters of Mackay Force and the **Central Macedonian Army** to be in the same village, **Perdikha**, and every effort was made to support **20 Division**, whose new position would be in the mountains on the right flank. A reconnaissance was ordered to see if the Germans could use the road to the east of Lake Vegorritis; a battery of **64 Medium Regiment** was offered ⁵ to strengthen the **Kedhronas** area in the extreme east of the front; and later General Wilson ordered that the detachment of **102 Anti-Tank Regiment** already with **20 Greek Division** should be increased immediately to one battery. So on 9 April **D Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment** sent one troop east of Lake Vegorritis to join the troop already with **20 Greek Division**, the other going to the west of **Lake Petersko**.

At first light next morning, 9 April, the units of **Mackay Force** were hastening into position. **First Rangers** left **1 Armoured Brigade** when it came through the mountains from **Edhessa**; motor transport and carriers were sent to the rear and the companies, dropping the role of motorised infantry, took over the line across the pass from **Vevi** to the western slopes. In front of them **2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment** was about **Vevi** covered by the

¹ **Lt-Col J. L. Grant**, ED; **Christchurch**; born **Timaru**, 19 Mar 1908; master butcher; CO **2 Bn NZ Scottish Regt** 1943; comd **Trg Unit**, **Burnham**, Oct 1943–Nov 1945.

² **2/11 Battalion** did not land in **Greece** until 12 April.

³ See pp. 169– 71.

⁴ He had that night taken over the **Central Macedonian Army** from General **Kotulas**.

⁵ Whether any such move was made is now uncertain.

distance far too great for any defence in depth.

The only arm in any strength was the artillery. The 2/3 Australian Field Regiment had come into position to support 2/8 Battalion and 1 Rangers; 2 Royal Horse Artillery would support 2/4 Battalion; and 64 Medium Regiment would cover the whole front.

In an anti-tank role and mostly on the forward slopes were a troop from 2 Royal Horse Artillery and many of the guns of 2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Battery.

The forces in reserve were, for the most part, along the highway to the south. On the Sotir ridge covering the exit to the pass were A Squadron 3 Royal Tank Regiment, whose parent unit was at Amindaion, and A Squadron 4 Hussars detached from the unit now stationed at Kozani. The two troops of New Zealand Divisional Cavalry were with Headquarters 1 Armoured Brigade at Perdikha, the headquarters for 6 Australian Division.

¹ On duty at the port of Volos.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS APPROACH THE MONASTIR GAP

The Germans Approach the Monastir Gap

The Germans in their turn were now interested in the advantages to be gained by an advance across the south-east corner of **Yugoslavia** and thence south through the **Monastir Gap**. They had always been appreciated by Field Marshal List. On 7 April, when Greek resistance along the Metaxas line had seemed unexpectedly strong, he had even considered postponing the advance to **Salonika** in favour of a major thrust through the gap towards **Florina** and the rear of the Allied positions. If he had done so the withdrawal of 1 Armoured Brigade from **Macedonia** would have been an extremely hazardous operation. As it was he persisted in his attempt to break through the Metaxas line, but at the same time prepared to exploit the advantages which **XXXX Corps** was so spectacularly winning in southern **Yugoslavia**. If he struck south from **Monastir** across the border to **Florina** and **Kozani** he could threaten the rear of the ' **Florina-Edessa- Katerini** front, reported occupied by British troops.' And if he then swung westwards through the passes of the central ranges towards **Koritza** or **Kastoria** he would threaten the withdrawal of the Greeks from **Albania**. As a preliminary move he had consequently on 8 April ordered **5 Panzer Division**, then moving with **Panzer Group 1** towards **Belgrade**, to turn south and assist **XXXX Corps**.

His battle orders for the next two days, 9–10 April, made it quite clear that **12 Army** would be entering **Greece** from **Yugoslavia** as well as from **Bulgaria**. It would attack 'as soon as possible and in the greatest possible strength', **XXXX Corps** through **Florina** towards **Kozani**, and **XVIII Corps** through **Edhessa- Veroia- Katerini** towards **Larisa**. The former would deliver the decisive blow through **Kozani** to **Larisa**, thereby threatening to surround the British forces in north **Greece**. To cover the western flank and 'take the Greek front directly in rear', a motorised force would strike west through the **Pisodherion Pass** to **Koritza** and

thence south down the valley to Kastoria and **Grevena**.

The task for *XVIII Corps* was the crossing of the Axios River and the passage through the mountains to **Larisa**. Once sound reconnaissances had been made *2 Panzer Division* would move through the passes behind **Edhessa**, **Veroia** and **Katerini**.

The two corps, *XVIII* and *XXXX*, were not able to attack simultaneously. The former, having just spread out across the plain of **Macedonia** and into **Salonika**, needed time to reorganise before attempting to cross the Axios River. So *XXXX Corps* was left to make the first move, even though its infantry regiments were still crossing the mountains and its motorised advanced guard in the **Monastir Gap** had not in itself the strength to force the **Klidhi Pass**. The commanders had therefore to find some solution to this problem.

The advanced guard, relieved of any responsibility to the south, was sent westwards towards Struga, at the north end of Lake Ochrida, where on 10 April it met the Italians advancing from **Albania**. The necessary weight to break south through the Monastir Gap had to be brought down from the northern group at Skoplje. The roads were cleared and *9 Panzer Division*, with the *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division* as an advanced guard, was diverted south to force the gap.

On 9 April the reconnaissance unit of the *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division* entered **Monastir**; by 8.30 p.m. a motor-cycle company was over the border and into **Florina**. The unit diary even claims that it went forward 'through English motorised forces' and occupied **Vevi** until infantry and artillery opened up. This is hardly likely as neither the infantry nor the artillery of **Mackay Force** recorded any action at this time.

Next day the main body of the Division rushed through Monastir, having been ordered to reach **Kozani** and cut off the retreat of the British forces from the passes behind **Edhessa**, **Veroia** and **Katerini**. The striking force, *Witt Battle Group*,¹ crossed the frontier at 9.40 a.m., pushing ahead 'so quickly that the enemy (English recce troops) was

unable to blow or burn bridges on the advance route.’² This is the only reference to the series of minor engagements that took place that morning when a demolition party, which included some New Zealanders from the Divisional Cavalry Regiment, withdrew before the approaching enemy.

According to the German diaries the column was strafed repeatedly by Hurricanes and Bristol Blenheims, the British in the early stages of the advance having ‘absolute air superiority.’ Nevertheless, in spite of demolitions and air raids the Group by nightfall was outside **Vevi** and probing the outer defences of the Klidhi Pass. ‘A reconnaissance-fighting patrol of one platoon ... was sent round the flank, got behind the foremost English positions NE of **Vevi**, captured 3 HMGs and 23 PW.’³ The other patrols reported that the pass road to **Edhessa** was held in strength, that British troops were about the **Klidhi Pass** ‘on a wide front’ and that the pass road westwards from **Florina** was held by Greeks.

¹ 1 Bn, 2 pls light inf guns, 1 pl heavy inf guns, 1 pl 50-mm a-tk guns, 2 pls 3 Engrs Coy, 1 tp light field hows, 2 pls 37-mm a-tk guns, 1 pl 88-mm AA guns.

² See p. 195.

³ See p. 196.

TO GREECE

MACKAY FORCE BOLDS UP THE GERMAN ADVANCE

Mackay Force bolds up the German Advance

The first engagement with the enemy in this sector and the first involving the New Zealand Division in **Greece** took place on the morning of 10 April. As part of a motorised patrol commanded by Captain P. G. Page of 1 Armoured Brigade, Lieutenant D. A. Cole's troop of **Divisional Cavalry** armoured cars went up the main highway to discover how close the Germans were and to delay them by wrecking several bridges just across the border of **Yugoslavia**. At one such bridge, the patrol stopped and the engineers, with the armoured cars screening the approaches, set about preparing their demolitions.

Shortly afterwards a German motor-cycle patrol came down the north road followed by a column of 'limousines, motor-cycles and side cars, light trucks and armoured cars.' Corporal King ¹ opened up with Bren fire, the German troop-carriers moved up and their mortars and heavy machine guns came into action. Captain Page still had hopes of finishing the demolition, but the volume of fire eventually forced him to abandon the solid stone bridge. King, who had aggressively maintained his forward position, thereupon withdrew under covering fire from Sergeant **Sutherland** ² and the whole patrol turned back for **Amindaion**. A **W Force** reconnaissance car and the engineers' truck went on ahead, leaving Captain Page with Cole's troop to make the final demolitions. ³

The next bridge, a wooden one, was wrecked, soaked in petrol and set on fire. Another one beyond it was similarly dealt with and the detachment raced off towards the lines of **W Force**. But from the crest of the slope above the bridge near the junction with the **Florina** road the party was astonished to see a staff car on the bridge itself and a line of men and vehicles along the roadside. Lieutenant Cole immediately withdrew his cars behind cover. When the patrol opened fire the astonished Germans withdrew up the road to **Florina**. The armoured cars

were then rushed across the bridge and south to the defences in **Klidhi Pass**.

Thereafter the front was relatively quiet, the Germans waiting for their artillery to come up and the British busily digging in. Their artillery, both field and medium, relentlessly shelled any visible concentrations of enemy troops and vehicles. A German bomber came over in the evening and a reconnaissance aircraft was driven away by anti-aircraft fire shortly afterwards, but the sky for the greater part of the day belonged to the **Royal Air Force**. The early morning reconnaissance flights had shown the Prilep- **Monastir** road to be jammed with vehicles waiting for demolitions to be repaired, so **Blenheim** bombers were attacking the assembling columns.

The infantry had still to complete their defences. The 2/8 Battalion, after its unpleasant night in the snow to the west of the pass, spent the day moving east across the pass and over the wet ridges to the right flank of **1 Rangers**. On the left flank there had been a gap between 2/4 Battalion and the Greeks, but late in the afternoon Lieutenant Newland of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, with a section of 5 Platoon and a section of 4 Platoon, was taken over in Australian trucks 'to close gap on left.' Once there the party worked with D Company 2/4 Battalion and some Australian anti-tank gunners. When contact was eventually made with **21 Greek Brigade**, the left company of 2/4 Battalion went into position on the western slopes of Point 1001.

That night, 10–11 April, was more restless. The Germans were now edging forward behind a screen of infantry patrols and 2/4 Battalion reported that at least one battalion was closing up on the left flank. Several tanks were disabled on the minefields but the majority of the Germans had no great trouble assembling about **Vevi**.

While this move was taking place the battalions of Mackay Force south and east of the village were constantly under pressure. Heavy mortar fire had to be endured and probing infantry had to be checked, but all went well until about midnight when the Germans made a

successful raid near the junction of 2/8 Battalion and 1 Rangers. They captured some men from each of these units and all, except one man, of 2 Section 6 Platoon 27 MG Battalion.

This irritating pressure from German patrols continued throughout the night until at 3 a.m. the Rangers withdrew for some distance the company on the extreme right flank. No. 1 Section 6 MG Platoon, having been left in an exposed position, was then withdrawn behind the Rangers to positions on the eastern side of the pass, and 2/8 Australian Battalion, already tired after its exhausting march from the western side of the pass, had to adjust its left flank to conform with that of the Rangers.

¹ **Cpl J. J. W. King**, MM; born **Oamaru**, 6 May 1917; lorry driver; died of wounds 17 Apr 1941.

² **Capt W. C. Sutherland; Howick**; born NZ 20 Mar 1909; bank officer.

³ A troop from **4 Hussars** was out on a similar demolition mission but it was cut off and lost four men through enemy action.

TO GREECE

PLANS FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE ALLIED FORCES

Plans for the Withdrawal of the Allied Forces

This pause in the German advance gave the Allied Command the necessary time to organise the controlled withdrawal of the Greek and Australian divisions from the north-eastern flank. Otherwise there could easily have been that confusion which so often develops during the strain of a retreat. In the morning General Papagos made a definite statement about his future policy. He confirmed in general the instructions ¹ already issued by General Wilson, but he also made some important variations for the safe

¹ See pp. 167– 9.

withdrawal of his armies from **Albania**. The new line would certainly extend westwards from **Servia Pass** but it would not, as Wilson suggested, continue westwards to **Grevena**. Once it reached the central range it would switch north-westwards along the hills from the Siatista area to Lake Kastoria. In the **Siatista Pass** would be 12 Greek Division; in the Vlasti and Klisoura area 20 Greek Division; in the Nimfaion area 21 Greek Brigade; and still farther north protecting the **Pisodherion Pass** there would be the Cavalry Division.

The movement to the **Olympus- Servia-Kastoria** positions was to be complete by 14 April, and the move of 12 and 20 Greek Divisions across the valley from the mountains on the right flank to the passes in the central range would be covered with ‘a vigorous defence by the (British) forces in the Kleidi position.’

The western sector of the line might be held either permanently or as a covering position which could at some later date be swung back to Mount Grammos. Papagos's ultimate intention was to withdraw the

Greek armies to a line running westwards from the **Aliakmon River** across the **Pindhos Range** to the Adriatic Sea near Santa Quaranta.

That afternoon Wilson, Mackay and General Karassos met at **Perdikha** and drew up the necessary timetable.

As the Greeks were short of motor transport the move would occupy three nights. That night, 10–11 April, three battalions would move out, on 11–12 April three more, and on 12–13 April the rearguard, including the **Dodecanese Regiment** from the right flank of **Mackay Force**, would begin its withdrawal to the **Servia** area.

Sixteenth Australian Brigade in the **Veroia** Pass area to the south of the Greeks would march to the mountain sector on the right flank of 4 New Zealand Brigade at **Servia**. This meant that the infantry, instead of being transported across the Aliakmon River and left to climb a mere five to six miles, would have to trudge some 30 miles through the hills and then form a line 3000 feet above sea level. The move would be exhausting, but it meant that if the Germans broke through **Mackay Force** at **Amindaion** the brigade would not be caught strung out along the main highway. Nevertheless, it was a lot to ask of troops unaccustomed to mountain warfare.

No time was lost in beginning these withdrawals. Two battalions from 20 Greek Division left shortly after the conference on a 25-mile march from positions south of Lake Vegorritis to the Klisoura and Vlasti areas. The same afternoon and night 2/3 Australian Battalion marched to the south end of the **Veroia** Pass and formed a line to cover the junction of the main road and the track by which 16 Brigade was to cross the mountains.

A serious difficulty was the fact that the main highway had to be used by both mechanised forces and 'Greek divisions with bullocks.' To simplify matters it was agreed, next day, that the **Dodecanese Regiment** which was to protect the right flank of **Mackay Force** should, temporarily, come under the command of 6 Australian Division. To

speed up the withdrawal about 500 of the 3000 Greeks were to be carried to the Klisoura area in British transport vehicles during the night of 11–12 April.

The overall situation was most disturbing. During the day the Germans had occupied **Florina** and moved south towards the **Klidhi Pass**; they had approached the **Pisodherion Pass** and had been halted by the Greek **Cavalry Division**; and away to the north they had joined forces with the Italians in the Lake Ochrida area. As the safe withdrawal of the Greek armies from **Albania** was now threatened, General Papagos instructed 11 Greek Division, which was in reserve, to safeguard the passes in the Metsovon area of the **Pindhos Range**. British transport, including a few vehicles of 4 RMT Company, was provided to assist in the move. ¹

Shortly after midnight Papagos met Wilson and discussed the situation which would develop after the cessation of his campaign in **Albania**. The chances were that the left flank of **W Force** would have to be strengthened.

¹ See p. 231.

TO GREECE

11 APRIL: FIGHTING IN THE KLIDHI PASS AREA

11 April: Fighting in the Klidhi Pass Area

The following day, 11 April and Good Friday, was bitterly cold with intermittent snowfalls making life wretched for the defenders, the majority of whom had just come over from the **Western Desert**. Visibility was very limited so there were no nuisance raids by the *Luftwaffe*, but when the sky did, on occasions, become clear the defenders could see German reinforcements ² debussing on the right flank near **Vevi** and **Kelli**. The *Witt Battle Group* was preparing 'to thrust through with all possible speed to **Kozani** in order to cut off the retreat of the English from the **Katerini-Veria-Edessa** line.' ³ A reconnaissance unit was moving eastwards through **Kelli** and into the mountains in order to link up with those units of *XVIII Corps* which were coming through the pass from **Edhessa**.

The mortars with the Group had been brought up during the night and were harassing the anti-tank units on the forward slopes; artillery was getting into position and bringing the whole front under steadily increasing shellfire but there were, as yet; no serious moves by the German armoured units. In the morning at least two tanks were disabled on mines outside the **Klidhi Pass** and in the afternoon there was a suggestion that a tank attack was developing in the Greek sector between **Lakes Vegorritis** and **Petersko**. A Squadron 3 Royal Tank Regiment was then sent from the **Sotir** ridge to the north of the pass to halt any advance along the northern edge of **Lake Petersko**. C Squadron and C Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment were despatched to **Pandeleimon** through a snowstorm and across eight miles of soft vineyard country. But no attack developed, so the only result of the counter-move was the loss of seven cruiser tanks because of engine trouble and broken tracks.

The more serious threats were from the infantry who, in spite of harassing fire from the artillery and the machine-gun companies, were

probing forward across the whole front. Late in the afternoon Point 852 was attacked; in the evening it was the high ground east of **Vevi** at the junction of the **Dodecanese Regiment** and 2/8 Australian Battalion. Both attacks were repelled, but it was clear that the Germans were taking advantage of the snowstorms and moving up to force a passage through the pass itself.

They had actually hoped to get through that day, but Major Witt had postponed the assault because some of his heavy weapons had been held up by the demolitions on the road. Besides this, the snowstorms which had lasted until 6 p.m. had made it impossible for the artillery to give effective support.

The threats of an attack wide out on either flank seemed, for the moment, to be less serious. In the mountains to the east 20 Greek Division had settled into position; 21 Greek Division was coming into line to the west; and west again in the Pisodherion Pass behind **Florina** another German advance had been halted by the **Cavalry Division**.

At the same time the opening moves of the withdrawal were under way. Units of 12 Greek Division had begun a long march to Kteni, where the new Greek line was to link up with the left flank of **1 Australian Corps**. Twentieth Division was thinning out its forward battalions in the Lake Vegorritis area and the two troops from 102 Anti-Tank Regiment in that area were to move out during the night to positions near Komanos from which they could help to cover the withdrawal of **Mackay Force**.

In the rear 1 Armoured Brigade had sent its B Echelon and other non-essential transport to **Trikkala**; senior officers were studying the **Sotir** ridge from which a rearguard would eventually have to cover the withdrawal of **Mackay Force**; and General Mackay moved his headquarters from **Sotir** to **Perdikha** to have closer liaison with Headquarters **Western Macedonian Army**. But the Greeks, without any reference to the Australians, shifted that night to Vateron. The move was certainly not far but this lack of liaison indicates one of the difficulties under which the campaign in **Greece** was conducted.

At a still higher level General Papagos had been preparing to withdraw his armies from **Albania**. He had advised General Wilson that he would 'instruct right corps on Albanian front to withdraw provided he was assured that 1 Armd Bde would operate against enemy in **Florina** should the latter attempt to interfere with the above withdrawal.' ¹ The British Military Mission in **Athens** assured the General that the brigade would make such an attack to prevent the Germans moving through the Pisodherion Pass to cut the line of retreat. But Headquarters **W Force** telephoned to **Athens** bluntly stating that 1 Armoured Brigade could give 'no such assistance as they can't get out to do it, the gap being closed by mines.' ²

² 7 Coy, 8 Coy less one platoon, tp 9 heavy howitzers, tp of tanks, coy of 47-mm a-tk guns.

³ Battle report of *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*.

¹ British Military Mission to HQ British Troops in **Greece**, 11 April (in confirmation of telephone conversation).

² Typed note added to the above message.

TO GREECE

12-13 APRIL: PLANS FOR A GENERAL WITHDRAWAL

12-13 April: Plans for a General Withdrawal

The following day, 12 April, Papagos issued the necessary orders. He may have waited too long, especially when the limitations of his antiquated transport system are considered. But it must always be remembered that 'Few commanders have been faced with a greater dilemma than was General Papagos.'³ He had wished to dominate the Albanian front before the impact of any German attacks and if, in his last offensive, he had captured the port of Valona the Italian divisions might well have been isolated in **Albania** and the greater part of the Greek Army thus made available for service against the Germans. And even if the attack in **Albania** had not been an overwhelming success, a Yugoslav advance from the north, for which Papagos had been negotiating right up to the time of the Yugoslav collapse, would have brought about the defeat of the Italians. Moreover, he had always to remember that a withdrawal would weaken the morale of his army, just as a major success in **Albania** would sustain the sorely tried people of **Greece**; that its political repercussions might be even more important than its technical difficulties. Consequently, it has been said that 'the vast possibilities offered by success in **Albania** should explain the reluctance of General Papagos prematurely to withdraw.'⁴

As the first move his **Cavalry Division** would that day counterattack towards **Florina** in order to block any German advance

³ Report by the Inter-Services Committee on **Greece**.

⁴ Ibid.

through the **Pisodherion Pass** and across the line of withdrawal of

the **Central Macedonian Army**. On 13 April that army and the **Army of Epirus** to the west would begin their withdrawal to the new line 100 miles to the south in the mountainous country of north-east **Greece**. With British forces already in position from the sea to **Mount Olympus** and westwards towards **Servia Pass**, the Greek line would run south to **Grevena** and along the Venetikos River, through the Pindhos Mountains and westwards roughly parallel with the Albanian frontier to the Adriatic coast near Lake Vutrinto. The eastern sector adjoining the British line would be held by the **Western Macedonian Army**; that to the west through the mountains to the sea would be the responsibility of the **Army of Epirus**.

The latter would probably be able to check any Italian approach from **Albania**. The **Western Macedonian Army** would certainly be reinforced by the remnants of the **Central Macedonian Army**, but its successful withdrawal to and from **Grevena** was extremely doubtful. The German columns streaming south through the **Monastir Gap** appeared to be concentrating to force **Servia Pass**, but there was always the threat of other units being switched westwards through the mountains to block the withdrawal of the **Western Macedonian Army** towards **Grevena**. The Greeks were therefore attempting to strengthen the defences of the passes along their right flank, so that, if they could be held until 16 April, many of the divisions in **Albania** would have had time to pass through **Grevena**.

In General Wilson's opinion such a smooth withdrawal was now impossible. Although the **Cavalry Division**, with 21 Infantry Brigade, was holding **Pisodherion Pass** in the sector extending from Lake Prespa south to Klisoura, the latest intelligence reports stated that **12 Division** about Siatista and **20 Division** in the passes west of Vlasti and Klisoura had to all intents and purposes disintegrated. This seems to have been the opinion of those who saw second-line troops struggling back on foot, but other observers assert that the front-line units were doggedly doing their best to prepare new positions.

General Papagos also defined the responsibilities of **W Force** in a

message to General Wilson which opened with the phrase, 'in accordance with my verbal order to you.' This was no doubt a reference to their discussions at **Pharsala** during the night of 10–11 April. **W Force** was responsible for the **Klisoura Pass** (inclusive)—**Mount Siniatsikon**—**Mount Bourninos**—**Servia Pass**—the **Olympus Pass**—the coastal route at the **Platamon** tunnel. Special attention was to be given to the defence of the passes and to the withdrawal of the Greek units with **W Force**. If there was any thrust westwards from **Florina** through the **Pisodherion Pass** towards **Koritza** or **Kastoria**, 1 Armoured Brigade was expected to counter-attack. To ensure the safe withdrawal of the **Dodecanese Regiment**—the rearguard of **20 Division**—the brigade would 'have to continue up to the end' to hold the **Klidhi Pass**. And in the south-east **Veroia Pass** would have to be held until the withdrawal of **12 Division**. From 13 April, when it expected to be in position, the Greek division would be responsible for the line from **Kteni** to **Kastoria**, including the **Klisoura Pass** and the road **Klisoura – Argos Orestikon**.

To simplify their withdrawal the Greeks made many requests for British motor transport and, whenever possible, this was given. Another request was for anti-tank guns to cover the **Klisoura**, **Vlasti** and **Siatista** passes. They were difficult to supply for there were only three anti-tank regiments in **Greece**: 1 Australian with **Mackay Force** in the **Klidhi Pass**, 7 New Zealand in the Mount **Olympus** sector and 102 British (less one battery) whose guns were divided between **20 Greek Division**, 4 New Zealand Brigade at **Servia** and 6 Australian Division. However, on 12 April B Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment was transferred from the **Servia** area to the **Siatista Pass** in the hills between **Kozani** and **Grevena**. Twelfth Greek Division when it arrived on the night of 12–13 April was somewhat disorganised, but its battalions moved on to the bluffs above the guns and prepared to give them covering fire.

It was impossible, in spite of repeated requests from the Greeks, to provide anti-tank guns for the **Vlasti** and **Klisoura** passes still farther north in the central range. First Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, after taking part in the initial defence of **Klidhi Pass**, withdrew to the **Servia**

area and C Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment at **Proastion** had to cover the withdrawal of **Mackay Force**.

Another problem, one always associated with withdrawals, was that of demolitions. The subject had been discussed as early as 9 April but there seem to have been no direct orders from General Papagos. Both 1 Armoured Brigade and 6 Australian Division had been made responsible at different times for a series of demolitions, but the work had evidently been held up for on 11 April Brigadier Charrington informed General Wilson that, in spite of previous agreements, demolitions were now essential.

The Greeks had certainly prepared demolitions in the Klisoura Pass and along the road ¹ from Kastoria into **Albania**, but after



General Freyberg at his desk, Maadi Camp

General Freyberg at his desk, Maadi Camp

A 4 Field Regiment gun crew trains at Maadi on an 18-pounder



A 4 Field Regiment gun crew trains at [Maadi](#) on an 18-pounder



19 Battalion at work on the anti-tank ditch at Wadi
Naghamish, June 1940

19 Battalion at work on the anti-tank ditch at Wadi [Naghamish](#), June 1940



New Zealand trucks carry back Italian prisoners from the First Libyan Campaign, December 1940

New Zealand trucks carry back Italian prisoners from the First Libyan Campaign, December 1940



River-crossing training on the Nile, February 1941

River-crossing training on the Nile, February 1941



The *Marit Maersk* arrives at Piræus, Greece, 17 March 1941

The *Marit Maersk* arrives at Piræus, Greece, 17 March 1941



Athens welcomes the New Zealanders

Athens welcomes the New Zealanders



Hymettus Camp

Hymettus Camp



Athens from the Acropolis

Athens from the Acropolis



21 Battalion men break their train journey north. The troops travelled in box-wagons (*Hommes 40, Chevaux 8*)

21 Battalion men break their train journey north. The troops travelled in box-wagons (*Hommes 40, Chevaux 8*)



The motor transport convoy on the road between
Elevtherokhorion and Dolikhe

The motor transport convoy on the road between [Elevtherokhorion](#) and [Dolikhe](#)



On the Aliakmon line; General Freyberg and his G1,
Colonel K. L. Stewart

On the Aliakmon line: [General Freyberg](#) and his G1, [Colonel K. L. Stewart](#)



GOC's conference. *From left:* General Freyberg, Colonel Stewart (dark glasses), Brig R. Miles (CRA), Brig E. Puttick (Commander 4 Brigade), Lt-Col W. G. Gentry (AA & QMG), Lt-Col G. H. Clifton (CRE), Col H. S. Kenrick (ADMS), Lt-Col S. F. Allen (Divisional Signals)

GOC's conference. *From left:* General Freyberg, Colonel Stewart (dark glasses), Brig R. Miles (CRA), Brig E. Puttick (Commander 4 Brigade), Lt-Col W. G. Gentry (AA & QMG), Lt-Col G. H. Clifton (CRE), Col H. S. Kenrick (ADMS), Lt-Col S. F. Allen (Divisional Signals)



General Sir Archibald Wavell—from a sketch by Peter McIntyre

General Sir Archibald Wavell—from a sketch by Peter McIntyre



General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson
General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson



General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, visits Maadi Camp. *From left:* Brigadiers R. Miles and E. Puttick, Generals Freyberg and Dill, Brigadiers J. Hargest and H. E. Barrowclough

General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, visits Maadi Camp. From left: Brigadiers R. Miles and E. Puttick, Generals Freyberg and Dill, Brigadiers J. Hargest and H. E. Barrowclough

¹ Lt Atchison, NZ Divisional Cavalry.

11 April British engineers moved across the mountains to safeguard the western flank of W Force. Third Cheshire Field Squadron, Royal Engineers, was on the road south from Argos Orestikon to Siatista and Grevena. The 2/1 Australian Field Company on the same stretch also dealt with the road through the pass from Siatista to Kozani.

After this date the desire of the Greeks to keep the roads clear for

the withdrawal of their armies from **Albania** and the wish of the British to protect their western flank created a serious difference of opinion. On 13 April ¹ General Papagos objected to the British preparing demolitions along the road from **Argos Orestikon** to Neapolis, **Grevena** and **Kalabaka**. He pointed out that it was the only road along which communications could be maintained with his central and western armies. The Western Macedonian Army had already prepared the demolitions to be blown on this road, so he suggested that the British detachments be withdrawn to avoid confusion or misunderstanding. If this request had been granted the road would have been relatively clear for a German advance. According to General Wilson, 'Greek GHQ issued orders about demolitions, observance of which would have prevented the Army leaving **Greece**.' ²

The orders ³ for the withdrawal itself were most carefully drawn up. First Rangers, supported by the New Zealand machine-gunners, was to hold the road through the **Klidhi Pass** until the Australian battalions on either flank had marched out and embussed for the **Servia** area. At the same time a small force consisting of 3 Royal Tank Regiment and some supporting units, including 2 Royal Horse Artillery Regiment and a platoon of New Zealand machine-gunners, was to be preparing a covering position on the ridge that runs north-east and south-west through **Sotir**. From there they could command the open country to the south of the **Klidhi Pass**.

South of that line on the ridge beyond the village of **Ptolemais** another covering force was to assemble. In the first stage there would be **4 Hussars** (less one squadron) and some attached troops; after the withdrawal from **Klidhi Pass** there would also be 1 Rangers (less one company) and 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion (less two companies and one platoon); and after the withdrawal from **Sotir** ridge there would be **2 Royal Horse Artillery Regiment**.

¹ On 13 April General Wilson decided to withdraw **W Force** to **Thermopylae** and issued orders for the preliminary moves.

Papagos was not informed of this decision until 16 April and continued to plan until that date in accordance with the arrangements made to hold the [Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line. The two generals were thus working at cross purposes during this period. See [pp. 215– 17](#).

² Wilson's report, Part III, para. 4b.

³ 1 Armoured Brigade Operation Order No. 5, 12 April 1941.

TO GREECE

12 APRIL: THE FIGHTING IN KLIDHI PASS AND THE WITHDRAWAL OF MACKAY FORCE

12 April: The Fighting in Klidhi Pass and the Withdrawal of Mackay Force

The timing of this withdrawal did not go according to plan, for Headquarters **W Force**, having decided that the moves must be speeded up, had already at 3.45 a.m. issued fresh instructions. The withdrawal had to be completed 'as soon as possible'. No exact time was given for the British units but the evacuation of the Greeks had to begin immediately; except for some small mule parties the last units of 20 Greek Division had to be west of the main south road (**Amindaion-Kozani- Servia**) by two o'clock that afternoon. The Dodecanese Regiment was to withdraw under Mackay's command, but he was rather surprised to learn that it contained not 3000 but 4500 men. However, he agreed that thirty 3-ton trucks should be provided to bring out their sick and wounded. The others withdrew at 3 p.m., marching out across the valley towards Klisoura Pass.

The object of these orders was obviously the clearance of the highway before the withdrawal of **Mackay Force**, but it increased the almost impossible task of the Greek divisions. They had 'straggled out, stolid and quiet', but according to General Papagos only a small section ¹ of **12 Division** reached the **Siatista Pass**; 20 Division was dispersed, and its fighting potential diminished, only a fraction of the men reaching the Vlasti-Klisoura sector.

Nineteenth Australian Brigade had to move to the Kerasia area and occupy the ground north of the **Aliakmon River** between the left flank of 4 New Zealand Brigade above **Servia** and the right flank of 12 Greek Division about the **Siatista Pass**. The regiments of artillery would withdraw beyond **Servia Pass** and 1 Armoured Brigade, after covering the

withdrawal of 19 Brigade, would retire through **Siatista Pass** to **Grevena**, where it would refuse the left flank of **W Force**. It had to be south of the ' **Olympus – R. Aliakmon Line**' by 8 p.m., 13 April. So, although no fixed times were stated for the units of **Mackay Force**, they would probably withdraw during the night of 12–13 April, thereby holding **Klidhi Pass** for two and not for three nights as originally intended.

In view of the impending attack and the nature of the weather this was a sensible decision. The night of 11–12 April had been bitterly cold, with blizzard conditions developing in the hills. The New Zealand machine-gunners on either side of the pass had been firing effectively along fixed lines, but at first light many of them were in no fit condition to work the guns. East of the pass No. 6 Platoon, after sending out three men with frostbite, sought shelter

¹ Six companies from 12 Greek Division were afterwards reported to be with 16 Australian Brigade in the Titarion area.

in a gully to which food and greatcoats had been brought up. Across the pass No. 1 Company endured equally evil conditions, while the Australian infantry fresh from North Africa and now tired after their long march into position 'were being taken out of the line suffering from exhaustion and frost-bite.'¹

The only reassuring fact was the appearance of the orders for the movement of the Force to the Aliakmon line. The Australian battalions, the artillery and finally **1 Rangers** would withdraw that night through a rearguard which would be established along the **Sotir** ridge under the command of the commanding officer 3 Royal Tank Regiment. Another rearguard under the command of the commanding officer **4 Hussars** would assemble farther south at **Proastion**, where a reconnaissance party was already selecting the defence line.

After 8.30 a.m. the chances of this withdrawal very soon declined. The German infantry, supported by heavy mortar and machine-gun fire,

attacked the ridges east of the pass at the junction of the Rangers and 2/8 Australian Battalion. The two Australian companies on the left flank were forced to withdraw up the slopes, but early in the afternoon the Australians counter-attacked and regained the crest of the ridge. The Germans, however, retained part of the western slopes of Point 997 and were able, in the area below it, to assemble guns, troop-carriers and tanks for yet another attack.

Meanwhile the Rangers, observing all this movement about Point 997 and thinking that the Australians were withdrawing, pulled back into the pass, hoping that they could form a new line about two miles to the rear. The supporting units were left to shift for themselves. No. 1 New Zealand Machine Gun Company, through whom the Rangers withdrew, remained in position and gave covering fire until the afternoon, but the six guns from 2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment were left unprotected and five had to be abandoned.

In the afternoon the German infantry supported by tanks attacked for the second time and 2/8 Australian Battalion was soon in difficulties. The signals communications to Headquarters 19 Brigade had been cut; the left flank was under fire from the Germans moving through the pass; and, most important of all, there were no anti-tank guns. The end came about 5.30 p.m. when the tanks broke through and forced the Australians to begin an exhausting march across country to **Sotir** and thence to the trucks assembled at the crossroads near **Rodhonas**. From there the battalion—with half the officers and two-thirds of the men still unaccounted for—

¹ Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 58.

went south to extend the western flank of 4 New Zealand Brigade in the **Servia Pass** area.

The New Zealanders with 2/8 Battalion, a section from each of 5 and 6 MG Platoons under the command of Lieutenant W. F. Liley, had a

correspondingly difficult day. In the morning when the Australians moved back the section from 6 Platoon joined 5 Platoon in the pass and supported the Australians with overhead fire. When 2/8 Battalion counter-attacked, 5 Platoon, with an Australian ammunition party, had moved forward in close support. Thereafter the platoons provided harassing fire until the approach of the tanks had forced the Australians to withdraw. No. 6 Platoon then gave covering fire but the Germans pressed forward; their artillery came into action and machine guns opened up in the pass from the area once occupied by the Rangers. The sections, taking the only course open to them, carried their guns across five or six miles of open country and were eventually transported to the **Proastion** area.

In the centre the Rangers after their morning withdrawal had not been able to build up a sound line in the **Klidhi Pass**. Because of the inevitable confusion which thereupon developed, Captain Grant, of 1 MG Company, lost touch with them and was obliged to rely upon the information he received from 2/8 Battalion. Consequently, when that unit fell back during the afternoon, its headquarters suggested that 2 and 3 Platoons of the machine-gunners should be withdrawn to the south side of Point 1009.

Their appearance in that area surprised the gunners of 2/3 Australian Field Regiment and 64 Medium Regiment. Communications were immediately established with Headquarters 19 Brigade whose staff, confident that all infantry units were still in position, was astonished to hear that the Rangers 'were already in rear of the guns and that in a very short time the medium battery would be under direct small arms fire from the enemy.' However, about 3 p.m. Headquarters 6 Australian Division ordered the artillery to pull out, 64 Medium Regiment to **Perdikha** and 2 Royal Horse Artillery to the **Sotir** ridge. No. 1 Troop of the latter, supported by two Australian anti-tank guns and, in the last stages, firing over open sights, checked the German tanks and covered the withdrawal of the group.

At this stage, about 3 p.m., the engagement was not going according

to plan. In fact, when the reconnaissance party returned from **Proastion** the Rangers were withdrawing from the pass, the enemy had occupied the hills on either side and the artillery had withdrawn. Major D. R. C. Boileau, second-in-command **1 Rangers**, who had been with the party, thereupon ordered formal withdrawal to the **Sotir** ridge where **1 MG Platoon** and a troop from **C Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment** were already in position. The former had been recalled that morning from **Point 1008** and told that 'the whole show was pulling back from the Pass'; the rearguard of which it would be a part must give the rest of **Mackay Force** 'a chance to get back' to **Proastion**. So when the Rangers re-formed, **C Company** went on to the ridge and the others hastened southwards. Soon afterwards **Brigadier Charrington** took command and got permission for **2/4 Australian Battalion**, when it withdrew, to be placed on the right flank of the company. Other groups were detached and by nightfall **2 Royal Horse Artillery**, **A Squadron 4 Hussars** and **3 Royal Tank Regiment**, less **A Squadron**, were assembled behind the ridge. The troop from **D Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment** had come back from the **Petras** area, but its guns had been abandoned owing to the premature demolition of the bridge near **Amindaion**.

The other problem was the withdrawal of **2/4 Australian Battalion** from the sector to the west of the pass. Once the eastern and central sectors had collapsed there had been every likelihood of this unit and its supporting troops being unable to reach the main highway. The company overlooking the pass had fallen back when the Rangers withdrew and the central company on **Point 1001** had afterwards been ordered to thin out, leaving on the feature one platoon of infantry and a section from **4 Platoon** of the **New Zealand machine-gunners**. Then about 5 p.m. **Brigadier Vasey** ordered the battalion to retire to the embussing point south of **Rodhonas** as 'the front had lost all cohesion.'

Captain Robbie with **2 Machine Gun Company** was advised of the withdrawal and placed under command of **2/4 Battalion**. He had already arranged for trucks to bring out the section of **4 Platoon** from **Point 1001** and had sent a runner to advise **Lieutenant Newland**, who was with

4 and 5 Platoons on the extreme left flank, that he must prepare to come out with the Australians. About 5.30 p.m., however, Robbie overheard a discussion on the telephone circuit which suggested that the overall situation was now very serious. Headquarters 2/4 Battalion confirmed the fact, explaining that the general withdrawal was already under way. The section on Point 1001 therefore began its withdrawal and Newland was advised to move out as soon as possible.

By this time Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam, who had been with the reconnaissance party, had returned and been informed of the plans for the withdrawal of his machine-gunners. With such vehicles as were available he returned to prepare for their arrival in the **Proastion** area. His headquarters staff waited on the road-side to sort out the unit vehicles as they came through along the now crowded highway.

The first group to arrive came from the immediate west of the pass. The section from Point 1001, after bringing out its guns, had joined up with Headquarters 2 Company and the remaining vehicles of Battalion Headquarters. When their route southwards was blocked by a demolished bridge, they followed a track and ended up hopelessly bogged only forty yards from the main highway. Only three of the eleven vehicles could be extricated; the rest were set alight and the men crowded into the other vehicles or were brought away by the passing Australian transport and taken to the **Proastion** area.

On the extreme left of the 2/4 Battalion area the sections from 4 and 5 Platoons of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion were with Australian infantry and anti-tank gunners. Lieutenant Newland, on receiving the withdrawal orders about 6 p.m., discussed the situation with the respective commanders. They decided that the anti-tank guns would have to be destroyed: the retirement of the machine-gunners would be covered by two platoons of Australian infantry. Leaving much of their personal gear, the gunners loaded their trucks with guns and ammunition and left about 7.10 p.m. for **Xynon Neron**. There they saw in the distance the flames of what were probably the burning vehicles of 2 Company, and by making a deviation across the fields reached the

trucks waiting on the main highway. By 9 p.m. 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, less the two companies in the **Mount Olympus** area and 1 Platoon on the **Sotir** ridge, had assembled with the rest of the rearguard in the **Proastion** area.

The Australian withdrawal went less smoothly. The company on the extreme left, after covering the withdrawal of the New Zealand machine-gunners, moved back to **Xynon Neron** with the troop from 2/1 Anti-Tank Regiment. By moving eastwards from there the Australians came in behind the forward elements of the German advanced guard. In the fighting which ensued the company commander was killed and some seventy Australians were captured. The rest of 2/4 Battalion, now only two rifle companies, came out safely to the waiting transport and moved off to the south. But instead of continuing as far as the Aliakmon line the battalion, at the request of Brigadier Charrington, was halted on the **Sotir** ridge and placed on the right of the company of Rangers. Here by 9.15 p.m. it was once again digging in and preparing to resist attack.

According to the German war diaries *1 Company SS 'Adolf Hitler'* had at 5 p.m. forced its way through the **Klidhi Pass** and taken eighty prisoners in the area. An hour later the forward elements of *Witt Battle Group* were at the south-eastern exit. 'As far as the eye could see were enemy motorised columns of infantry and artillery retreating towards **Ptolemais.**'¹ The tanks and machine-gun units harassed the British but the heavy weapons were still to the rear, blocked for the time being by the demolitions on the road. An attempt was made to approach the British rearguard along the **Sotir** ridge but the harassing fire was heavy and the Germans withdrew, digging in astride the road, facing south. It was while they were digging in that the Australian company from 2/4 Battalion came up from the rear and was captured. The German commander thereupon decided that though **Sotir** was reported to be clear he would not move forward again until the roads had been repaired sufficiently for the movement forward of his heavy weapons and anti-tank guns.

TO GREECE

THE SITUATION BY NIGHTFALL, 12-13 APRIL

The Situation by Nightfall, 12-13 April

Thus by nightfall the Allies were away from the **Klidhi Pass** and covered by a rearguard that had assembled along the **Sotir** ridge some six miles from the southern exit. Twenty-first Greek Brigade to the west of **Mackay Force** had fought stubbornly and then withdrawn to join 20 and 12 Divisions in the line of the passes: Klisoura–Vlasti–Siatista. The withdrawal of the **Dodecanese** Regiment from the eastern side of the **Klidhi Pass** had been hastened by the use of Australian trucks, ² but 20 and 12 Divisions, moving on foot and using only pack animals, were not yet in position. This was the reason for a complaint ³ made later by General Papagos that **W Force** had given insufficient protection during the withdrawal of his **Central Macedonian Army**. Yet it is difficult to see what could have been done to assist it. Time was a vital factor, but the Greeks had virtually no transport and the problems of liaison between the Allies had been too great.

Mackay Force had suffered severely, not so much in the fighting about the pass but in the withdrawal to the waiting transport. The 2/8 Battalion after a long march to the Rodhonas area had only 250 men, many with no weapons; 2/4 Battalion had lost one of its three ⁴ companies; 1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment had lost sixteen guns, ten of them when a demolition had isolated eighty officers and men, and five when the Rangers had withdrawn from the **Klidhi Pass**; 2/3 Field Regiment had destroyed two guns when they were bogged in soft ground. The British losses were also serious. The Rangers had lost heavily, both in men and equipment, 102 Anti-Tank Regiment had been forced to destroy a troop of guns on the east flank and 64 Medium Regiment had been forced to leave a gun.

The New Zealand losses were difficult to estimate but twenty men were missing, of whom twelve ¹ were believed to be killed. Two Vickers

guns had been lost to the German raiders on the night of 11–12 April, and one had been destroyed when the eight transport vehicles had been left in the open country near Xynon Neron.

The German losses are difficult to estimate but they were relatively low. The assault unit, *I Battalion SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division*, had 37 killed, 98 wounded, and 2 missing, a small price to pay for what was described as a bold attack which opened the door 'to the heart of Greece' and 'paved the way to final victory.'²

² See p. 204.

³ Papagos, p. 372.

⁴ One company was on duty at Volos.

¹ One man was killed, 11 were captured and 8 later rejoined their unit.

² Battle report *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*, April 1941.

TO GREECE

THE GERMAN PLANS, 13 APRIL

The German Plans, 13 April

Once through the **Klidhi Pass** the Germans during the night of 12–13 April made their plans ³ for two separate thrusts into northern Greece. The SS *'Adolf Hitler' Division* would send a force south-westwards towards the Klisoura Pass and Kastoria with the intention of destroying 3 Greek Corps headquarters at Koritza and forcing the surrender of the northern section of the Greek army in **Albania**. *Ninth Panzer Division* would continue the advance southwards towards **Kozani** and **Larisa**. Next morning a mobile force, preceded by a strong reconnaissance patrol and followed by tanks, would hasten through *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division*, following hard on the heels of the British and giving him 'no time to prepare any organised resistance.' ⁴

At dawn, however, the forward units beyond the **Klidhi Pass** were forced to fight a minor engagement with the British rearguard which was holding the **Sotir** ridge in unexpected strength. It was not until 10 a.m. that the forward elements of *9 Panzer Division* were over the ridge and following the now retreating British, who were described in air reports as 'large motorised columns and an English armoured division', withdrawing towards **Ptolemais** and **Kozani**. *Thirty-third Panzer Regiment* was hurriedly brought forward and at **Proastion** there was the second rearguard engagement of the day.

³ See pp. 218– 19.

⁴ Appendix 256, *9 Panzer Division* war diary.

TO GREECE

THE REARGUARD ALONG THE SOTIR RIDGE, MORNING 13 APRIL

The Rearguard Along the Sotir Ridge, Morning 13 April

The enemy had approached the ridge the previous evening but had been content to send out patrols and to harass the front with light tracer fire. The British had therefore been free to organise their defence system. The main road bridge to the west of the line had been demolished and 2/4 Australian Battalion, now only two companies strong, had dug itself in along the eastern section of the ridge.

The position was well suited for a delaying action. To the south-west were miles of swamp and lake from which the ridge rose abruptly and extended north-eastwards towards Lake Vegorritis. The road which squeezed its way through between swamp and ridge bridged the stream below the ridge and ran northwards across the plain to the **Klidhi Pass**. In the distance were the poplar trees about **Amindaion**, the hill country which had just been defended and the white road below it which ran westwards towards Kastoria.

The Australian companies held the three miles to the east overlooking the stream and the approach from **Amindaion**, leaving the Rangers on their left to watch the road and the demolished bridge. C Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment (less one troop) covered the road and the western end of the ridge and 2 Royal Horse Artillery the whole front. The New Zealand machine-gun platoon had two guns covering the road and two sited for enfilading fire to the east and west. In reserve were two squadrons from 3 Royal Tank Regiment.

At dawn the men, if they had binoculars, could see the enemy moving about their lorries and half-tracked vehicles and unconcernedly preparing for another day's work. The whole front opened up and the Germans were ordered to take cover, having as yet no support other than 37-millimetre anti-tank guns. Very soon, however, the infantry,

supported by machine-gun fire and then by artillery, crossed the stream below the Rangers and crept forward until they were halted by B Squadron 3 Royal Tank Regiment, which had moved up to hull-down positions along the ridge.

The withdrawal then began. The 2/4 Australian Battalion was away by 9 a.m., travelling by truck through **Kozani** to Kerasia and thence to the sector west of **Servia**. The forward battery of **2 Royal Horse Artillery** and C Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment pulled out, the latter coming up under the covering fire of the New Zealand machine-gun platoon. Finally, B Squadron 3 Royal Tank Regiment moved forward towards the enemy, covering the front while the Rangers and machine-gunners withdrew to the waiting transport.

Lieutenant **MacDonald**¹ with his machine-gunners came out without any casualties. They had fired the last of their 10,000 rounds, dismounted the guns and carried them back to the trucks in which they travelled to the rearguard position, then just south of **Proastion**.

The operation was over by 10 a.m., by which time the Germans were preparing an attack from the **Xynon Neron** area and shelling the ridge with 88-millimetre anti-aircraft guns. The casualties had been very light but 3 Royal Tank Regiment had lost five more tanks, four from mechanical defects and one from enemy action.

¹ **Capt H. J. MacDonald**; Whangaruru South, **North Auckland**; born **Napier**, 9 Aug 1908; sheep-farmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

TO GREECE

THE REARGUARD IN ACTION: AFTERNOON 13 APRIL

The Rearguard in Action: Afternoon 13 April

In the afternoon the Germans approached **Proastion**, a village south of **Ptolemais** and at the northern entrance to the Komanos Gap. Across the front, as at **Sotir**, a stream flowing north formed a natural anti-tank ditch. Above it from north-east to south-west there was a range of hills some 1500 feet high from which any movement along the main highway was clearly visible.

The rearguard was already in position, having used the night and the time gained that morning during the engagement at **Sotir**. The Rangers, less 1 Company, were astride the road at the entrance to the pass. Fourth Hussars, less one squadron and supported by A Squadron 3 Royal Tank Regiment, watched the right flank; the other squadron of **4 Hussars** covered the left flank from the sharp ridges above the plain. Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons 1 New Zealand Machine Gun Company and 4 Platoon 2 Machine Gun Company were deployed along the ridge with **1 Rangers**. B Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment (now reduced to seven guns) was on the left flank, whilst two batteries of **2 Royal Horse Artillery** were well back in depth.

In the original orders 1 Armoured Brigade was to have been south of the **Aliakmon River** by 8 p.m., but there had been doubts about the ability of 12 and 20 Greek Divisions to complete their withdrawal across the valley to the rear of the defence line. Brigadier Charrington had consequently been warned that he must force the maximum delay upon the German advance. He, in turn, had asked for a more definite time and mentioned that there were apparently no Greeks still to the north-east of **Kozani**, but the absence of any reply to this message suggests that he was left to act upon his own judgment.

Meanwhile the units on the ridge had been watching the Germans

advance swiftly and methodically from the **Perdikha** area. They came 'in groups of tanks and armoured tp. carriers with bridge laying tanks well forward. By 1430 they were in contact with our patrols south of **Ptolemais**.' ¹ More important still, they

¹ Lt-Col R. P. Waller, 'With the **1st Armoured Brigade in Greece**', *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, July 1945, p. 169.

found that a ditch some 500 yards south of the town was a perfect obstacle to the tanks. If they turned east there was the stream and a blown bridge. To the west was a swamp with several ditches full of water, but it was possible for the tanks to get through and surround the British rearguard.

That decided, the Germans made every effort to force their way through before nightfall. The weather had at last cleared, so dive-bombers for the first time in the campaign were sent over in large numbers. On the ground the pressure was maintained across the whole front, but the main effort was an encircling movement behind the left flank of the British position. All through the afternoon a steady stream of armoured vehicles moved through Asvestopetra and swung back towards Mavropiyi, a village near the main highway and the headquarters of Brigadier Charrington.

Towards dusk about thirty tanks were through the swamp and threatening Mavropiyi. A troop from 102 Anti-Tank Regiment and **2 Royal Horse Artillery** (L/N Battery) did their best to halt them but the Germans still came forward. 'H.Q. 4 H. and a tp. of 3 R.T.R. went to meet them but the enemy's Mk. IIIs were too heavy metal for the old light Mk. VI of 4 H. who were driven back. A very unpleasant situation now developed with the enemy pressing forward towards the main **Kozani** road in rear of our positions.' ¹ The rearguard was saved by Lieutenant A. W. Trippier of 102 Anti-Tank Regiment, who skilfully shepherded the enemy armour into a gully and knocked out several tanks with very slight losses to his own troop. C Troop 3 Royal Tank

Regiment then came across from the right flank to the high country west of the main road and supported the anti-tank guns.

At this point the New Zealand machine-gun platoons were brought more prominently into the engagement. Up till then they had been well forward, enduring air and artillery attacks but seeing very little of the fighting on the left flank. At dusk, however, 'everything seemed to happen at once.'² On Brigadier Charrington's orders the two platoons from 1 Machine Gun Company were withdrawing down the main highway, but when the German tank force threatened to break through they were stopped and deployed along the ridge on the left of the road to the west of Komanos. From there, while guns and transport were withdrawing southwards, they maintained a volume of covering fire until they too were withdrawn by Brigadier Charrington.

No. 4 Platoon 2 Machine Gun Company came out shortly afterwards, having received its orders to withdraw when the other machine-gunners were in action west of the road. It was almost

¹ Waller, op. cit., p. 169.

² Capt H. A. Purcell, 27 MG Battalion.

dark by then, but a second engagement between German tanks and British tanks supported by the Royal Horse Artillery had flared up to the west of Brigade Headquarters. The platoon was ordered to give what fire it could. 'It was a most pretty sight. Blazing tanks and trucks, 2-pr. and 50 mm. tracer, m.g. and bren tracer, flashes from guns and rifles, and bursting shells, with the last afterglow of the setting sun and the dark mass of the mountains as a background.'¹

At 7.30 p.m. Charrington decided to withdraw behind the third rearguard position at Mavrodhendhri; the main body of his force could go to **Kozani and thence westwards through the Siatista Pass to **Grevena**. The infantry and artillery were first away, the armoured units**

following under cover of a smoke screen.

The third rearguard position, at Mavrodhendhri, was occupied by a small force but the Germans made no effort to go beyond **Proastion**. The forward units, having expended all their ammunition and almost all their petrol, were forced to wait for supplies, which did not get through until the following day. Apparently *9 Panzer* and SS '*Adolf Hitler*' divisions in their haste to get forward had entered the **Klidhi Pass** at the same time, thereby creating a congestion of traffic that had stopped the movement of both troops and supplies. The fact that the pass was not clear until after dark probably explains the respite given to 1 Armoured Brigade. The rearguard fell back at 1.30 a.m. on 14 April, **4 Hussars**, 102 Anti-Tank Regiment, **1 Rangers** and 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion (less two companies) going to the **Grevena** area.

The overall position now was that **W Force** and the Greek armies were in their respective sectors of the Aliakmon line. The German approach had been checked but it was questionable whether the cost had not been too great. Nineteenth Australian Brigade had lost heavily and 1 Armoured Brigade, the only Allied unit of its type in **Greece**, had been shattered. Fourth Hussars still had the majority of its light tanks, but 3 Royal Tank Regiment because of mechanical defects was reduced to one composite squadron. The 102nd Anti-Tank Regiment and **2 Royal Horse Artillery** had both lost guns and **1 Rangers** had lost at least 15 per cent of its establishment.

¹ Waller, pp. 169–70.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 10 – THE GREEK FRONT BEGINS TO CRUMBLE

CHAPTER 10

The Greek Front begins to Crumble

General Wavell visits Greece, 11-13 April

IN March, when **W Force** was assembling in **Greece**, the Joint Planning Staff at General Headquarters, **Cairo**, had thought it wise to study the problems of evacuation. A few weeks later the wisdom of their decision was apparent. The Greek armies were in difficulties, **Yugoslavia** had collapsed and the disasters in **Cyrenaica** had forced Wavell to retain the **Polish Brigade** and 7 Australian Division for service in North Africa. Convinced that the Aliakmon line could not be held for any length of time, the planners had 'asked their respective Chiefs to be allowed to set certain preparatory arrangements for evacuation in action.' The **Royal Air Force** and, more particularly, the **Navy**, with its possible beach and shipping problems, were prepared to act but 'the Army's hands were tied.' The dangerous subject was not to be mentioned. Even when permission was given for Major de Guingand of the Joint Planning Staff to assist in the preparation of inter-service plans, 'the veto upon raising any matters with the Army still stood.' The fact was made quite clear to him on 11 April when he travelled to **Greece** on the same aeroplane as General Wavell. It was 'pain of death' ¹ if he mentioned anything to the army in **Greece**.

The General, who had for the last few days been worried by Rommel's spectacular advance through **Cyrenaica**, was now on his way to discuss the future of **W Force**. On 12 April he was in **Larisa** explaining to General Blamey the retention of 7 Australian Division in the **Western Desert** and discussing with General Wilson the problems of **W Force**. It was difficult to co-operate with the Greek armies, the German armoured divisions were rushing south, the tank tracks of 1 Armoured Brigade were not standing the strain and because of the difficulty of using wireless in the mountains it was not always possible for the authorities in **Athens** and **London** to have an exact picture of the swiftly changing front. The generals consequently decided that **W Force** must be

withdrawn still farther to the south.

¹ Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand, *Operation Victory*, pp. 71–6.

Wavell thereupon returned to **Athens** justifiably concerned about the future of **W Force**. If the Greeks continued to fight the force must remain and play its part; it was morally impossible to leave without the assent of the **Greek Government**. And even if evacuation were possible, the examples of Narvik and **Dunkirk** suggested heavy losses in both men and equipment.

No decisions had been made with General Wilson about evacuation plans. ¹ But on 13 April before he left **Athens**, Wavell discussed the subject with de Guingand and arranged for the problem to be studied by responsible officers. The naval attaché in **Athens** thereupon advised ² Admiral Cunningham that evacuation was a possibility; on 14 April the Joint Planning Staff completed its plans; and on 15 April Cunningham was warned that evacuation would probably begin within a few days.

¹ ‘The first time I mentioned evacuation to Wavell was in a signal I sent after my meeting with Papagos at **Lamia** on April 16th after the latter had suggested it.’—Wilson to Playfair, letter, 19 Sep 1954.

² Commanders-in-Chief Committee, ‘Inter-Service Lessons learnt in Campaign in **Greece**, March–April 1941’.

General Wilson decides to Withdraw to Thermopylae

In **W Force** itself there was, as yet, no suggestion of evacuation; the all-important question was still that of withdrawal. After the discussions of 9–11 April when Wilson and Papagos had decided upon the line for ‘protracted defence’, their respective forces had begun to withdraw. But an undisturbed retreat by the slow-moving Greek armies was almost

impossible. On 12 April Papagos was asking the British to send anti-tank guns to the Klisoura, Vlasti and Siatista passes, to use 1 Armoured Brigade in the **Klidhi Pass** and to provide motor transport for some of the Greek divisions. That night, however, when Wavell met Wilson at **Larisa**, there seems to have been no thought ³ of any withdrawal other than that already agreed upon.

The reports which came in that night and throughout the next day, 13 April, changed the whole programme. The road about **Grevena** was crowded with Greek troops patiently marching south; the **Cavalry Division** was still holding the **Pisodherion Pass**, but 12 and 20 Divisions were said to have disintegrated during their movement across the valley to the Klisoura and Siatista passes.

³ Maj-Gen R. J. Collins, *Lord Wavell*, p. 374, states that ‘... it was becoming obvious that **W Force** would not be able to stand for long even on the **Mount Olympus-Edessa** line. Accordingly, before leaving, Wavell and General Wilson discussed a further withdrawal, the administrative re-adjustments for which were set on foot at once.’ As **W Force** had then left the **Edhessa** area and was preparing to hold the **Mount Olympus- Servia** sector, it is therefore possible that the generals discussed the withdrawal to the **Thermopylae** area which was decided upon by Wilson and Blamey the following day. General Wilson, however, is convinced that the discussion was ‘just a general review of the situation’ (Wilson to Playfair, 19 Sep 1954).

These reports were probably too critical but they were natural enough, for the simple transport of the Greeks and the detachments of weary soldiers, base troops for the most part, did not inspire confidence. Wilson decided that the Greek GHQ was rapidly losing control and that the Greek Army could no longer be relied on as a fighting force. In this opinion he was undoubtedly unjust to the units remaining in the forward areas.

The other facts which influenced Wilson were the hesitation of Papagos before deciding to withdraw and the relatively slow withdrawal

of his armies after that decision had been made. In his opinion 'the Greek C-in-C could never really bring himself to give up his successful campaign against the Italians.'¹ This was likely enough as other Greeks were of the same opinion. When it became known that **3 Corps**² was to withdraw, the Metropolitan Bishop of Ioannina protested. 'I then implored the army commanders not to carry out this fatal order and to act on their own initiative. This was declined as they considered it disloyal. General Platis (Chief of Staff, **Army of Epirus**) ... finally stated that he would only withdraw as far as the Greek-Albanian frontier and if he had orders for a further withdrawal he would not carry them out.'³ Papagos may not have known of these discussions, but he knew that his armies would be disappointed and was very appreciative of the dangers which would develop when his slow-moving divisions began their withdrawal.

That night, 13–14 April, Wilson discussed the situation with Blamey and, without consulting Papagos, decided to withdraw to **Thermopylae**. The preliminary moves would be made as soon as possible.

At first thought too much seems to have been abandoned at too early a date: all **Greece** was to be left to the enemy, except for the **Peloponnese** and the narrow strip between **Athens** and **Thermopylae**; in future there would be no co-operation with the greater part of the Greek Army; the British would move back swiftly in their motor transport but the majority of the Greeks would have to march 100 or more miles. Moreover, **W Force**, now in position from the **Platamon** tunnel to **Mount Olympus** and **Servia Pass**, had not been seriously attacked. The Germans were certainly threatening the three passes in the mountains along the eastern flank of the Greek armies but the Central Macedonian Army and the **Army of Epirus** were still able, in spite of the *Luftwaffe*, to withdraw along the highway through **Grevena**.

¹ *Operations in Greece*, report by Lt-Gen Wilson, para. 54d.

² The **Western Macedonian Army** had been renamed **3 Corps**.

³ Rich, quoting narrative of Metropolitan Bishop of Ioannina.

On the other hand, many of the British commanders had never been confident of the ability of the Greeks to face the highly mechanised units of the German Army. They argued that courage and primitive equipment were no match for a modern army supported by an aggressive air force. To complicate matters, the collapse of **Yugoslavia** and the crisis in North Africa now made it impossible to establish a **Balkan** front and difficult for **W Force** to remain in **Greece**. As time soon showed, Wilson and Blamey had made the right decision. If the withdrawal to **Thermopylae** had been delayed any longer, even for one day, the greater part of **W Force** would never have left **Greece**.

The orders ¹ for the move were immediately prepared, but the urgency of the situation was such that nearly twenty-four hours before they were issued on 15 April several units ² had already received their instructions and were moving to build up the successive rearguard positions through which the main body of **W Force** was eventually to withdraw.

¹ See pp. 226– 8.

² See p. 237 (**Divisional Cavalry Regiment**); p. 238 (6 Brigade).

The German Plan of Attack

While these decisions were being made, Field Marshal List had hastened to adjust his plans according to the changes along the front. On 12 April, when one force had entered **Edhessa** and another was forcing its way through the **Klidhi Pass**, he issued new orders. *Eighteenth Corps* would advance upon **Larisa** from its bridgeheads south and east of **Veroia** 'with its main weight going through **Katerini**.' *Second Panzer Division* was therefore preparing to approach **Larisa** through the

coastal gap covered by 21 Battalion ³ and through **Olympus Pass** in the 5 Brigade sector. ⁴

Fortieth Corps on its way south from **Yugoslavia** had 'to push 9 Pz Div on through **Kozani** and the **Aliakmon** sector' to the key town of **Larisa**. That was to be the major effort; and by the evening of 14 April its advanced guard ⁵ was beyond **Kozani**, with patrols across the **Aliakmon River** and approaching **Servia**. At the same time Field Marshal List, still sensitive about his open right flank, had taken good care to screen each gap in the western ranges. In the **Pisodherion Pass** west of **Florina**, *73 Division* was to force its way through towards **Kastoria**, but the major diversion was to be made farther to the south. The SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division, with *5 Panzer Division* 'following up with all speed', had to fight its way through the **Klisoura Pass** towards **Kastoria** and to send from



The Planned Withdrawal to **Thermopylae**, 14–18 April 1941

there a strong battle group to **Koritza** in the hope that it might destroy Headquarters Greek Corps and force the surrender of the northern flank of the Greek Army. With his right flank secure he would then, and only then, despatch a force southwards through **Grevena** to encircle the Allied line.

³ See pp. 244– 8.

⁴ See pp. 260– 2.

⁵ See pp. 210– 14.

14 April: The Greek Front begins to Crumble

The threat was soon apparent. On the morning of 14 April W Force learnt that 20 Greek Division in the Klisoura area urgently needed armour and anti-tank guns. Nothing was done to assist it, in fact nothing could be done, and before midday signals were coming through to say that the SS *'Adolf Hitler'* Division had occupied Klisoura and was striking westwards through the pass. The Greeks drew up orders for an immediate counter-attack but the available reinforcements were so limited that the plan had to be dropped. All that could be done was to order the Cavalry Division to block the Kastoria- **Grevena** road against a possible thrust from the north. If the Germans broke south towards **Grevena**, 1 Armoured Brigade must halt them until another line was established to the rear. With these readjustments it was hoped that the Greeks could continue their withdrawal, 9, 10 and 13 Divisions of the **Western Macedonian Army** moving south towards **Grevena** and 11 **Division** on the western flank occupying the **Metsovon Pass** to check any possible attack from the Epirus.

1 Armoured Brigade Group, including New Zealand units, withdraws from Grevena, night 14-15 April

In the **Grevena** area the situation had naturally become more tense. On 14 April, after their withdrawal from **Vevi** and **Ptolemais**, D Company **1 Rangers** and 3 Royal Tank Regiment, now only one squadron strong, were screening the approaches from the north; B Company **1 Rangers** and B Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment were supporting the Greeks to

the east in **Siatista Pass**; the rest of the brigade group, including 27 New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion (less two companies) and the two troops from New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, were immediately south of **Grevena**.

The day will always be remembered by those who were there for the many devastating attacks delivered by the *Luftwaffe*. Near **Grevena** three raids took place within an hour and a half: 'The road was littered with vehicles ... three English boys killed at the same AA gun (155 Lt AA Battery) no sooner was one gunner killed than another rushed to take his place'¹ **The New Zealand**

¹ **Atchison, Divisional Cavalry.**



DISPERSION OF GREEK FORCES AND WITHDRAWAL OF 1 ARMoured BRIGADE, 14-17 APRIL 1941

machine-gunners who were farther south sheltering under the olive trees were also bombed and strafed but they suffered no casualties. The two troops from the **Divisional Cavalry** were equally fortunate when they were sent north of **Grevena** to cover the demolition of bridges, the move beginning during a raid and continuing with the attached engineers racing their truckload of explosives past the blazing vehicles along the highway.

The brigade had been led to expect another stubborn rearguard action, but as the hours passed Brigadier Charrington decided that the retreat of the Greeks from the passes to the north and the German attack upon **Servia Pass**¹ forced him to order an early withdrawal. The detachments supporting the Greeks in Siatista Pass were therefore withdrawn and that night the units, when ready, joined the line of traffic slowly moving south. Thus, when the **Divisional Cavalry** troops returned about midnight, the brigade was on its way to positions south of the Venetikos River.

The defence plans of **W Force** had in their turn to be adjusted to meet this threat from the west. An early air report that morning, 14 April, had certainly mentioned enemy vehicles moving westwards from Klisoura, but the strength of the supporting columns had not suggested that the main thrust was to be made in that direction. With the heaviest volume of traffic on the road from **Kozani** towards **Servia Pass**, there had been more reason to think that there would be a drive directly southwards rather than an encirclement of the western flank.

Nevertheless, General Wilson had always expected Marshal List to order an encircling movement through **Grevena** or, if his column advanced still deeper into the Epirus, a still wider move from Ioannina through Metsovon and across the Pindhos Mountains to **Kalabaka**. To meet this threat, a brief survey of the eastern approaches had already been made by Brigadier S. Savige of 17 Australian Brigade,² who had arrived in **Greece** some days ahead of his battalions and had been sent to reconnoitre these possible lines of advance. On his return to Headquarters **Anzac Corps** on 14 April the question of a defence line was then discussed, Brigadier A. Galloway, General Wilson's BGS, pressing for the despatch of 17 Brigade to **Kalabaka**. The decision was made for them when it was reported that the Germans, having driven 20 Greek Division from the Klisoura Pass, were moving to cut the line of withdrawal of the **Western Macedonian Army**.

The orders for the assembly of **Savige Force** were hastily prepared.

¹ See Chapter 13.

² 2/5, 2/6, 2/7 Battalions; 2/11 Battalion of 19 Australian Brigade.

Battalion and 2/5 Battalion (less one company) were immediately sent on to Kalabaka. The seven cruiser tanks ¹ of Headquarters Squadron 1 Armoured Brigade, which had been exchanged for the two troops from C Squadron New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment, came up that afternoon. Twenty-fifth Battery 4 New Zealand Field Regiment had already been established in Olympus Pass, but at 5.35 p.m. it received its movement orders and within two and a half hours was making an exciting night drive without headlights to Elasson, Larisa and Kalabaka. Next day it came under the command of 64 Medium Regiment, which had arrived with one composite battery. In support there were also a battery from 2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, a company from 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion and 2/2 Australian Field Company.

¹ See pp. 170–1. On 9 April they had left 1 Armoured Brigade, crossed the Aliakmon River, joined 2 NZ Divisional Cavalry and eventually were sent back to Larisa.

Situation at Last Light, 14 April

On the other sectors of the front there was more confidence. Emphasis was now being given to the fact that Australians and New Zealanders were once again fighting together. A suggestion that the two Dominions should provide a corps had already been made in March 1940, but there had been problems of administration and general policy which had made the authorities hesitate and eventually allow the proposal to lapse. On 6 April, when the different units in Greece had been united to form 1 Australian Corps, the romance of combined action in another

April and in a country adjoining Gallipoli had caused General Freyberg to tell his Prime Minister, Mr Fraser: 'We are now linked with the 6th Australian Division; thus the Anzac Corps is again in being.'² He seems to have suggested that the official title should be changed from 1 Australian Corps to Anzac Corps, for the cable from Australia to New Zealand announcing the change stated that it was 'at the request of the New Zealand Division and with Blamey's full agreement.'³

The announcement to the divisions had been made on 12 April by General Blamey:

As from 1800 hrs 12 April 1 Aust Corps will be designated ANZAC CORPS. In making this announcement the GOC ANZAC CORPS desires to say that the reunion of the Australian and New Zealand Divisions gives all ranks the greatest uplift. The task ahead though difficult is not nearly so desperate as that which our fathers faced in April twenty-six years ago. We go to it together with stout hearts and certainty of success.

The message with this information had been taken to Headquarters New Zealand Division by Captain Morrison¹ of 25 Battalion, whose Bren carriers had been dispersed as part of an anti-parachute force about Corps Headquarters. His story is more natural than the text of the message. He had been asked by Brigadier Rowell to wait while the message was being prepared. The Brigadier had then said: 'I'll let you know what is in it. It will save you opening it on the way home!' He read it and General Blamey said: 'There you are, sonny, you have only got to live till 6 o'clock to-night to be a---Anzac.'

There had been, so far, relatively little fighting for the new Anzacs but every effort was being made to complete the defences before the storm broke. The New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment, having withdrawn² from the plain about Katerini, was by nightfall behind 5 and 6 Brigades. Sixteenth Australian Brigade³ had arrived in the mountains to the west; 4 New Zealand Brigade was established about Servia Pass; and 19 Australian Brigade⁴ was still farther to the west

adjoining the right flank of the Greeks. No orders for the withdrawal to the **Thermopylae** line had been issued, but the assembly of rearguards through which these forward brigades would eventually be withdrawn was already under way. **General Freyberg** had been asked to 'expedite the withdrawal of NZ Div Cav' to positions covering the western approaches from **Dheskati** to **Elasson**. His 6 Brigade Group, which was moving to positions between 16 Australian Brigade and 5 Brigade, was that night recalled ⁵ to form a rearguard covering the two roads between **Elasson** and **Tirnavos**.

² *Documents*, Vol. II, p. 7.

³ Acting PM, **Canberra**, to acting PM, **Wellington**, 22 Apr 1941.

¹ **Maj R. Morrison**; **Lower Hutt**; born **Wellington**, 10 Jul 1902; company representative.

² See pp. 235– 7.

³ See p. 270.

⁴ See p. 238.

⁵ See pp. 237– 8.

15 April: The Situation becomes More Serious

The following day, 15 April, was one of disaster. Away to the north, the request of the Yugoslav Government for an armistice was to lead two days later to the official capitulation of that ally from whom so much resistance had been expected. The Army of Epirus was withdrawing with only slight interference from the Italians, but the **Western Macedonian Army** was already crumbling before the swiftly moving German armoured

columns. In the mountains west of **Florina** the Greeks had not been strongly pressed, but farther south **20 Division**, forced out of the **Klisoura** and **Vlasti** passes, was withdrawing across the **Aliakmon River** to the **Neapolis** area. In the **Lake Kastoria** area, where the Germans reported stubborn resistance, **13 Division** and the **Cavalry Division** had held the towns of **Argos Orestikon** and **Kastoria** until late afternoon, but by nightfall the *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division* had broken through to the **Kastoria-Grevena** road, thereby preventing any further withdrawals to the south. The two Greek divisions, together with **9** and **10 Divisions** which had been falling back towards the west branch of the **Aliakmon River**, withdrew south-west to the **Pindhos Mountains**. And still farther south **12 Greek Division**, which had retired from the **Siatista Pass** area, was assembling to the west of **Grevena**.

The day was also notable for a sudden increase in the number of air attacks. After the raid on the night of **6–7 April** the bombing of **Piræus** harbour had continued 'until the port was almost wholly disorganized';¹ the minor ports of **Khalkis** and **Volos**, being possible bases for **W Force**, had been bombed and magnetic mines had been laid across the **Saronic Gulf**. But the **Royal Air Force** had still been able to patrol the frontier and attack the German lines of communication, even though bad weather during **8–12 April** had limited its activities, especially its invaluable reconnaissance flights. Now that the weather had cleared it was hopelessly outnumbered. German aircraft, transferred from **Yugoslavia** and operating from hastily prepared airstrips about **Prilep** and **Monastir**, were therefore able to begin that 'widespread, continuous and intense' strafing and bombing which was to continue throughout the campaign.

The **Royal Air Force**, now unassisted by a Greek observer system, was very hard hit. At dawn the **Hurricanes** at **Larisa** and the **Blenheims** at **Niamata** were badly damaged. The railway station at **Larisa** was bombed throughout the day, the civilian staff being so disturbed that the British were forced to provide crews to operate the trains. Air Vice-Marshal **D'Albiac**, who observed the raid on **Larisa**, promptly decided that the few

remaining aircraft must be sent back to the **Athens** area even if it meant that **W Force** would have to operate with less protection from the air.

The result was particularly noticeable in the Greek sector. First Armoured Brigade had left ² the **Grevena** area before midnight on 14 April, but it was not until the evening of 15 April that it was across the Venetikos River, no more than 12 miles away. The gorge south of **Grevena**, the sharp ridges, the corkscrew bends and the narrow bridges had encouraged a paralysing congestion of traffic. At dawn, 15 April, 'it was possible to see the road ahead packed with Greeks, Yugo-Slavs and British, military and civilians, motor, horse and ox transport, all intermingled, head to tail, and two lines

¹ Cunningham, p. 340.

² See pp. 219– 21.

deep wherever the road permitted it. An awful sight, made more dreadful by certainty that the arrival of the **Luftwaffe** would not be long delayed It was a clear, bright, sunny day and from about 0700 dive bombing and machine gunning attacks were continuous along the whole length of the road.' ¹ When the two troops from the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** caught up with 1 Armoured Brigade they found the road 'a shambles of destroyed vehicles, bomb craters and all sorts of equipment.' ²

By 5 p.m., when the worst was over, 102 Anti-Tank Regiment and **1 Rangers** were in position above the Venetikos River with the brigade taking up positions behind them. The Germans were now miles to the north. Fourth Hussars, the last unit to come out, had seen nothing of them and a patrol that was sent back that evening reported that the enemy had not yet entered **Grevena**.

Meanwhile, to the rear, in the **Kalabaka** area, **Savage Force** was preparing another line. Instead of a position near the junction of the

Grevena and **Metsovon** roads, the Brigadier had chosen a sector some two to three miles west of **Kalabaka**, with the upper **Pinios River** on his left flank, a stream across the front and more open country on the right which would have to be defended in depth. The straggling Greek troops had already been cleared from the area; 2/5 and 2/11 Australian Battalions were preparing the line; the artillery were south of **Kalabaka**, 25 Battery 4 New Zealand Field Regiment being near the village of **Aimnades** and the medium artillery to the east of **Kalabaka** below the great cliffs which overlook the upper **Pinios River**.

In the afternoon of 15 April General Wilson had appeared, hoping to discuss the situation with General **Tsolakoglou**, the commander of **3 Corps** [the **Western Macedonian Army**]. He failed to find the General but was able to inform Brigadier **Savige** of the withdrawal plans³ to be issued by **Anzac Corps** at 6 p.m. The 2/6 and 2/7 Battalions and a company from 2/5 Battalion and 2/1 Field Regiment (less a battery), all on their way north from **Athens**, would not come through to **Kalabaka**. With 19 Australian Brigade, which would be withdrawing that night from the hills west of **Servia**, they would instead establish a rearguard⁴ at **Dhomokos**, a town in the hills north of **Lamia**.

He also warned the Brigadier that his force must have on hand the necessary transport for a swift withdrawal. So it was arranged

¹ Waller, *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, July 1945, p. 171.

² Atchison, *Divisional Cavalry*.

³ See pp. 227– 8.

⁴ See p. 227.

that eighty¹ trucks should be available from a convoy of 120 three-tonners which was coming through that night with 3000 Greek troops²

from the western side of the **Metsovon Pass** to the crossroads north of **Kalabaka**. The convoy, which included eighteen trucks from 4 New Zealand RMT Company under the command of Second-Lieutenant **Pool**,³ came through successfully but the Greeks did not go into the line at **Kalabaka**. They cluttered up the forward areas and ‘added weight to the stream of refugee troops, mule trains and mule carts passing through from **Grevena** to **Trikkala**.’

Kalabaka, famous for its monasteries perched on the tops of pinnacles or clinging to the cliff faces, had long since been in a state of turmoil: ‘the straggling Greek troops, without food, took what they could from the shops and houses civilians took their current and reserve needs from the now-unprotected dumps, from which Greek troops had fled to join the procession eastwards.’⁴

¹ At the request of HQ **Anzac Corps** the number was afterwards reduced to fifty.

² They were probably part of 11 Greek Infantry Division, a reserve formation of the **Western Macedonian Army**, ordered to move by British transport to hold the crossings over the **Venetikos River** south of **Grevena**.

³ **Lt-Col J. Pool**, m.i.d.; Te Kopuru, **North Auckland**; born England, 12 Jun 1904; credit manager; LO with SHAEF in **Europe** 1944–45; LO with British Army staff **Paris**, 1945–46.

⁴ Brigadier Savige, in Long, p. 103.

Anzac Corps delays the German Advance; Withdrawal Orders are Prepared

In the eastern sector on 15 April the British units had been in close contact with the enemy. Above the **Platamon** tunnel 21 New Zealand Battalion⁵ had to check the advanced guard of the unexpectedly large

force moving down from **Salonika**; from **Olympus Pass** the guns with 5 New Zealand Brigade ⁶ had opened fire on a column of tanks and vehicles. In the wild country some six miles south-east of **Servia**, 16 Australian Brigade ⁷ was moving into positions after its long march from **Veroia Pass**. West again in the **Servia** sector 4 New Zealand Brigade ⁸ had surprised and captured a confident advanced guard; and still farther west across the river and adjoining the Greek right flank, 19 Australian Brigade and 26 New Zealand Battalion, ⁹ as yet undisturbed by the enemy, were hastening to establish defences.

At the different headquarters there was a corresponding sense of urgency that was intensified after 9.5 a.m. when Headquarters **W Force** issued its orders for the withdrawal to **Thermopylae**. To

⁵ See pp. 244– 8.

⁶ See pp. 261– 2.

⁷ See p. 227.

⁸ See pp. 273– 6.

⁹ See pp. 237– 41.

cover the withdrawal of the deployed brigades, four forces were already being organised to hold the successive rearguard positions: 1 Armoured Brigade, operating directly under **Anzac Corps**, in the **Grevena** sector; **Savige Force** in the **Kalabaka** area; 6 New Zealand Brigade south of **Elasson** about **Tirnavos**; and the not yet formed **Lee Force** at **Dhomokos** to cover the road and rail routes south of **Larisa**. The engineers would carry out maximum demolitions in depth along the roads and in the defiles. As for the Greeks, Anzac Corps would make every effort 'to ensure that GK forces do not withdraw on routes

available to Imperial Forces, and that they do not in any way whatsoever hinder the withdrawal.' These arrangements were the responsibility of General Blamey, the inevitable political problems ¹ making it necessary for General Wilson to be in **Athens**.

Accordingly, at 6 p.m. that same day, 15 April, Headquarters **Anzac Corps** issued detailed orders. ² There would be two phases. In the first the rearguards would be established and the preliminary withdrawals undertaken. Sixth New Zealand Brigade, instead of linking 5 and 16 Brigades, would move to positions 'astride the circle of roads from **Elasson to Tyrnavos**' where, supported by 2/3 Australian Field Regiment, it would be the rearguard through which 5 New Zealand Brigade would withdraw from **Olympus Pass** and 4 New Zealand Brigade from **Servia Pass**.

Nineteenth Australian Brigade and 26 New Zealand Battalion would withdraw from the **Servia Pass** area, where they were to have linked **Anzac Corps** and the Greek right flank. Twenty-sixth Battalion would rejoin 6 Brigade; the Australians would be transported through **Larisa** and **Pharsala** to **Dhomokos** where, with 2/6 and 2/7 Battalions, a company of 2/5 Battalion and 2/1 Field Regiment (less a battery), all hitherto detailed to join Savige Force, they would form **Lee Force**.

Sixteenth Australian Brigade, which had been moving ³ through the mountains ever since 12 April and was now in position between 5 New Zealand Brigade in **Olympus Pass** and 4 New Zealand Brigade in **Servia Pass**, would march out that night to the south side of **Servia Pass**, and from there be transported to Zarkos. There, with the support of one field regiment, it would be astride the **Trikkala- Larisa** road covering the withdrawal of 1 Armoured Brigade from **Grevena** and **Savige Force** from **Kalabaka**.

¹ See pp. 362– 7.

² The orders as outlined here include the operation instructions

issued on 16 April. The decision to withdraw had been made on 13 April (see pp. 216– 17). In some cases, e.g., the movement of 6 NZ Brigade to **Elasson**, the Corps orders were the formal expression of verbal orders which had already been given.

³ See pp. 197– 8.

If these moves were complete by 8 a.m. on 16 April the second phase of the withdrawal could begin, with **General Freyberg** responsible for the front. On the night of 17–18 April, ‘subject to ability to disengage’, 5 Brigade at **Olympus Pass**, 4 Brigade at **Servia Pass** and **Savige Force** in the **Kalabaka** area would be withdrawn through the rearguards to the **Thermopylae** line, 100 miles to the south.

The following night, 18–19 April, 6 New Zealand Brigade from the **Elasson** area, 16 Australian Brigade from **Zarkos** and 21 New Zealand Battalion from the **Platamon** tunnel on the coast would withdraw, ‘**1st Armoured Brigade** covering the final withdrawal across the flat featureless plain of **Thessaly** on 19th April.’¹ In turn its withdrawal would be covered by **Lee Force** astride the road at **Dhomokos** in the hills to the north of **Lamia**.

All marching personnel would be carried in motor transport, the New Zealand Division following the road to **Volos** and thence along the coast to **Lamia** and through the pass at **Thermopylae**. The Australian Division, continuing south along the main highway, would use the main road through **Pharsala** and **Dhomokos** to **Lamia** and thence to **Brallos Pass** in the mountains to the west of **Thermopylae**. The actual transportation of the brigades from the forward areas was a task for the reserve motor companies, of which 1 RMT Company, RASC, and 4 (New Zealand) RMT Company, less the vehicles attached to assist the Greeks, were with **Anzac Corps**; 2 and 308 RMT Companies, RASC, were retained by Headquarters **W Force**.

The Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport, Brigadier Collings, had already been warned that **81 Base Sub-area** was to move from **Larisa**

to the **Thebes** area. So during the night of 14–15 April all the workshop sections with their heavy equipment had been on the road, and trainloads of base troops, ammunition and essential stores had left by rail from **Larisa**.

¹ 'Report on Operations **Anzac Corps** during Campaign in **Greece**, 1941.' In **Anzac Corps** Operation Order No. 1, 15 Apr 1941, however, 21 NZ Battalion is not mentioned.

Withdrawal of 1 General Hospital

Among the units which made this early withdrawal was 1 New Zealand General Hospital, which had been at **Pharsala** ever since 22 March. On the night of 14–15 April the patients were taken to a train at the **Demerli** railway siding, but the orders were countermanded and they had to be brought back to camp. The following evening, however, sisters, staff and patients were all evacuated. The sisters ² left in the transport provided by the Mobile Dental Unit. The 428 patients moved at first light, 112 convalescents walking with the staff to the siding some six miles away, and the others being transported in relays in the six available vehicles. The expected hospital train did not arrive, but one without an engine was made up from the wagons at the siding and, in spite of protests from the Greek transport officials, was added to another which came through from **Larisa**.

Once daylight came, those aboard had their exciting moments. There were air raids and the Greek engine-driver did not want to work, but a New Zealander and an Australian kept him to his task and in the afternoon of 16 April the train reached **Athens**. The patients and the majority of the staff went either to 26 General Hospital or 2/5 Australian General Hospital. The others ¹ went to **Voula**, where on 17 April they established a convalescent hospital at the Reinforcement Base Camp. Next day the sisters who had been billeted in **Athens** were transferred to houses in **Kifisia**.

² Eight Australian sisters who had been sent back from the north travelled with them.

¹ Captains A. N. Slater and G. R. Kirk, Lieutenants H. M. Foreman, J. Borrie and P. N. R. McDonald.

The Withdrawal Plans have to be Changed, 16 April

On 16 April the Higher Command was at last certain of the order in which the enemy now proposed to play his much superior cards. The encirclement which General Wilson had expected from the west via **Grevena** and **Kalabaka** was certainly developing, not because it was a major feature of the original plan but because the commander of 9 *Panzer Division* had made ² it quite clear to the commander of **XXXX Corps** that any frontal attack upon the escarpment above **Servia** 'would be pointless.' Consequently, when *59 Motor Cycle Battalion* had linked up with the *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division*, it had been decided to rush **5 Panzer Division** through the **Siatista Pass** to become, once the bridge south-east of **Grevena** had been repaired, the spearhead of an attack through **Kalabaka** and **Larisa**. At the same time the main body of *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division*, now in the Kastoria area, would be relieved by *73 Division* and hurried south to advance via **Grevena** and **Dheskati** to **Elasson**, 'with the object of getting behind the **Servia** positions and causing them to collapse.' ³ The one point to the advantage of **W Force** was that both these encircling moves demanded time.

It was suddenly apparent, however, that the more dangerous threat to the security of **W Force** was the German attack ¹ on **21 Battalion** above the **Platamon** tunnel. In the opinion of the Greeks, no strong attack could be developed in this wild country and their appreciation had been accepted by Wilson, Blamey and **Freyberg**. Attacks on 15 April and during the night of 15–16 April had been checked, but at nine o'clock next morning an encircling movement in conjunction with a frontal tank attack had forced the battalion to withdraw up the **Pinios**

Gorge. Eighteenth Corps, with 2 Panzer Division along the coast and 6 Mountain Division on the slopes of Mount Olympus, was now threatening to break through to Larisa, the key town on the line of withdrawal.

The moment General Blamey had clear evidence of this threat he realised that 21 Battalion must be reinforced. ² In fact he had, at 1 a.m., already despatched his artillery commander, Brigadier C. A. Clowes, 'to ascertain the position' and 'to direct the Battalion Commander as to his course of action.' His direction was that the western end of the gorge must be held at all costs.

Variations in the plans of Anzac Corps were accordingly made late that night, 16–17 April. Sixteenth Australian Brigade, ³ instead of going to Zarkos to cover the western approaches to Larisa, would now cover the western exit of the Pinios Gorge. Under the command of Brigadier A. S. Allen there would also be 21 New Zealand Battalion, 4 New Zealand Field Regiment (less one battery), one troop 7 New Zealand Anti-Tank Regiment and eleven carriers from 2/5 and 2/11 Australian Battalions.

In the withdrawal General Mackay of 6 Australian Division would be responsible for protecting the right and left flanks ⁴ of the New Zealand Division until it passed through Larisa. After that he would control the withdrawal through Dhomokos to Thermopylae of Savige Force, Zarkos Force and finally of Lee Force. First Armoured Brigade would cover ⁵ the withdrawal of Savige Force to Larisa and thereafter that of 6 Australian Division, under whose command it would then be. As Allen Force, like the New Zealand Division, was to withdraw through Volos, it would be controlled by General Freyberg. All engineers were placed under Corps control, with each force commander becoming responsible for demolitions on his section of the highway. If sufficient delay was imposed upon the enemy the following timetable was to be adopted: on the night of 17–18 April Savige Force would come back to Zarkos and 4 and 5 New Zealand Brigades would withdraw beyond Larisa; on the night of 18–19 April 6 Brigade would continue the withdrawal through Larisa. The subsequent withdrawal of Allen and Savige Forces would be decided

by Generals Mackay and Freyberg.

The more detailed orders for the New Zealand Division had already been issued by General Freyberg. As the first step, 5 Brigade on the night of 16–17 April was to pull back to temporary positions on the crest of Olympus Pass. Duff Force with anti-tank guns, machine guns and the carrier platoons from 6 Brigade was to occupy defensive positions about the road junction at Elevation. Next day the Divisional Cavalry Regiment, less one squadron to the west along the road to Dheskati, would take up a covering position just to the north of the road junction. The following night, 17–18 April, 4 and 5 Brigades would withdraw. As 4 Brigade Group moved south, 26 Battalion would rejoin 6 Brigade in the Elason area and 7 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, 6 New Zealand Field Regiment and 2/3 Australian Field Regiment would come under the command of the CRA New Zealand Division in support of 6 Brigade. The other units would turn off south-east at Iarisa and follow the Veletinon-Almiros road to the Molos area behind the Thermopylae line. The same night 5 Brigade Group would be taken to a staging area between Veletinon and Almiros. The transport would then return for 6 Brigade, the 4 Brigade transport returning to take 5 Brigade to the Molos area.

The Divisional Cavalry Regiment at Elevation, 6 Brigade to the south at Elason and 21 Battalion in the Pinios Gorge would hold on throughout 18 April. After darkness fell they would disengage and, with the Divisional Cavalry Regiment in the rear, move back to Thermopylae.

² See p. 280.

³ SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division because of rain and demolitions, did not complete this move. On 19 April, when the forward battalions were beyond Milia, new operation orders were issued. 'The enemy has abandoned the Servia positions under the influence of our flanking move, whose effect was beginning to be felt.' The division was then ordered to advance south-west from Grevena towards Ioannina to prevent the main body of the Greek

Army withdrawing south.

¹ See pp. 244– 8.

² 21 Battalion was under the command of **Anzac Corps, General Freyberg** being occupied with the withdrawal of his brigades from the northern sectors.

³ Less 2/1 Battalion in divisional reserve.

⁴ In the event **Allen Force** came under the command of New Zealand Division and thus its right flank was protected.

⁵ See pp. 232– 3.

The Withdrawal continues through Kalabaka, 16 April

In the Greek sector the roads were still clogged with traffic. On the night of 15–16 April a British transport company had crossed the Pindhos Mountains for another load of Greek troops. Lieutenant Pool, whose truck had broken down, had not gone with the convoy, but next morning he was sent forward through the mass of refugees with written instructions from Brigadier Savige for the company to disregard the Greeks and to return to **Kalabaka**. At the foot of the **Metsovon Pass** he met the trucks returning empty—the Greeks of their own accord had refused to move east. Once back at **Kalabaka** the company divided, the majority remaining attached to **Savige Force**, the New Zealand lorries returning to **Nikaia**.

At last light 1 Armoured Brigade, now the rearguard, was preparing to hold positions on the south bank of the Venetikos River. But at 11 p.m. its commander, Brigadier Charrington, announced that next day all units would continue southwards through **Kalabaka**. Accordingly, at 10 a.m. on 16 April the withdrawal ¹ continued, 27 New Zealand Machine

Gun Battalion leaving at 2 p.m. and the rearguard at 3 p.m. Movement was just as difficult as it had been the previous day, but no effort was made to turn eastwards along the Karperon- **Dheskati- Elasson** diversion, which was still being screened by the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry**. Apparently no patrols had been sent to survey this route and the only information available suggested the danger of enemy interference.

The route was therefore south through Velemisti and **Kalabaka**, along 'an awful road which had been bombed very heavily the day before. The effect of the rain on the damaged track, metalled only in occasional stretches was immediate and serious Maps were unreliable and the better looking of two routes petered out in a quagmire. Bomb holes had to be filled in. In places the road had been quite destroyed and deviations had to be made frequently, while every vehicle that used them made the mud worse. Trucks which slithered off the mountain track and down the hillside had to be hauled back Everywhere lay the debris of the retreating army. Ammunition, arms and equipment, derelict vehicles, dead men and animals' ²

Movement was necessarily very slow. The leading vehicles passed through **Kalabaka** before nightfall but the main body spent the night in and about Velemisti, about 20 miles along the road. The rearguard had moved only five miles. Yet it had been 'a blissful day as it poured with rain the whole time with very low clouds, so there was no strafing on the road.' ³ As one machine-gunner said: 'It was the most marvellous move we made—over a mountainous area by roads which if we had seen in daylight we would have classed as impassable. One section of 9 miles took us 6 hours.' ⁴

Next morning, 17 April, as the brigade was continuing its withdrawal through **Kalabaka**, the question of its future movements had to be decided. General Mackay had hoped to use it in the country south of **Larisa** to cover the withdrawal of 6 Brigade. ⁵ The orders from General Blamey which arrived about midday were that the force should remain at **Kalabaka** to cover the

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¹ The bridge over the Venetikos River was left undemolished. Brigadier Savige sent back a British engineer from 292 Field Company, RE, who fired the charges. The Germans by that time were through Grevena.

² Waller, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

³ CRME file.

⁴ Major P. W. Wright, 27 MG Battalion.

⁵ See pp. 237– 8.

drawal

of **Savige Force**. But the orders from General Wilson had been that it should pull back into reserve at **Atalandi**, about 180 miles away and well behind the **Thermopylae** line. The solution finally adopted was that the brigade should leave a small detachment—a carrier platoon of **1 Rangers**, a troop from 102 Anti-Tank Regiment and 5 Platoon 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, the two troops from the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and the seven cruiser tanks from 1 **Armoured Brigade**—to operate with **Savige Force**.

The rest of the brigade group went on to the **Atalandi** area. At the **Pinios River** the traffic bridge ¹ had been unexpectedly wrecked but the column was diverted north to another, by which, in spite of air attacks near the river and afterwards about **Larisa**, it was able to join the main stream of **W Force** vehicles withdrawing towards **Thermopylae**. On the evening of 18 April the units were dispersing about **Atalandi**, 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion (less two companies and one platoon) going to an area eight miles north of the town.

¹ See p. 312.

Collapse of Greek Resistance

By then the Greeks had ceased to make any serious efforts to halt the German columns. On 15 April, after his failure to find the Greek commander at **Kalabaka**, Wilson had returned to his headquarters which were now south of **Larisa**. There he received a message to meet Papagos next morning at **Lamia**. Outside the town they met ² and discussed the situation. The Germans were through the Klisoura Pass and the Greeks were taking to the western hills; in **Albania** the Italians were pressing forward along the whole front. Wilson mentioned his decision to withdraw to **Thermopylae**, and Papagos, who does not seem to have known that the move was already under way, expressed his approval. To avoid further devastation Papagos also suggested that the British forces should be withdrawn from **Greece**. General Wilson immediately arranged that General Wavell in **Cairo** should be informed of the proposal.

The same morning Brigadier Savige was able to meet General Tsolakoglou in **Kalabaka**. As the straggling Greek troops were still hampering the efforts of the Australians to prepare defences, the Brigadier suggested that the Greeks should be organised and marched outside the areas in which fighting might take place. The General agreed but his vigorous objections to Australian engineers preparing demolitions on the road across the Pindhos Mountains to Ioannina suggested that he was 'double-crossing'. ¹ The Australians were not surprised when half an hour later the General and his staff left for Ioannina, the headquarters of the Army of Epirus.

That army, not greatly harassed by the Italians, had been steadily withdrawing but the senior commanders had shown no desire to make any heroic stands, particularly against the German columns. Convinced that their cause was hopeless, they had already on 14 April petitioned the High Command and the **Greek Government** to end the war. In the

Athens area Greek troops were now for some unknown reason enjoying general leave and wandering aimlessly about the streets. And the day that General Tsolakogloa left **Kalabaka** the Metropolitan Bishop of Ioannina, who was pro-German in his sympathies and anxious to save his country from the Italians, was urging the Prime Minister, **M. Koryzis**, to end the war.

² Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940–41*, pp. 379–80: ‘On the morning of April 16th I met Gen Wilson outside **Lamia** and after a review of the situation it was decided to order the withdrawal of the British forces to the **Thermopylae** position.’ The written order confirming this was issued in **Athens** on 17 April.

¹ Long, p. 92. These were the words used by Savige.

The Overall Situation

Elsewhere the situation was even worse. In North Africa the advanced guard of Rommel's army was approaching the border of Egypt while the main body was probing the outer defences of **Tobruk**. Its repulse on 14 April showed that the situation was not altogether hopeless, but this success was already balanced by expected but yet disturbing news from the **Balkans**.

On 13 April, the day that Wavell returned to Egypt, the Germans entered Belgrade. The armies of **Yugoslavia** were then in such confusion that on 15 April ² their commander asked for an armistice. So whatever the conditions in North Africa, it was essential that Wavell should in the very near future return to **Greece** and there decide whether the expeditionary force should fight it out or be evacuated by the **Royal Navy**.

² The capitulation was complete by 17 April.

TO GREECE

GENERAL WAVELL VISITS GREECE, 11-13 APRIL

General Wavell visits Greece, 11-13 April

IN March, when **W Force** was assembling in **Greece**, the Joint Planning Staff at General Headquarters, **Cairo**, had thought it wise to study the problems of evacuation. A few weeks later the wisdom of their decision was apparent. The Greek armies were in difficulties, **Yugoslavia** had collapsed and the disasters in **Cyrenaica** had forced Wavell to retain the **Polish Brigade** and 7 Australian Division for service in North Africa. Convinced that the Aliakmon line could not be held for any length of time, the planners had 'asked their respective Chiefs to be allowed to set certain preparatory arrangements for evacuation in action.' The **Royal Air Force** and, more particularly, the **Navy**, with its possible beach and shipping problems, were prepared to act but 'the Army's hands were tied.' The dangerous subject was not to be mentioned. Even when permission was given for Major de Guingand of the Joint Planning Staff to assist in the preparation of inter-service plans, 'the veto upon raising any matters with the Army still stood.' The fact was made quite clear to him on 11 April when he travelled to **Greece** on the same aeroplane as General Wavell. It was 'pain of death' ¹ if he mentioned anything to the army in **Greece**.

The General, who had for the last few days been worried by Rommel's spectacular advance through **Cyrenaica**, was now on his way to discuss the future of **W Force**. On 12 April he was in **Larisa** explaining to General Blamey the retention of 7 Australian Division in the **Western Desert** and discussing with General Wilson the problems of **W Force**. It was difficult to co-operate with the Greek armies, the German armoured divisions were rushing south, the tank tracks of 1 Armoured Brigade were not standing the strain and because of the difficulty of using wireless in the mountains it was not always possible for the authorities in **Athens** and **London** to have an exact picture of the swiftly changing

front. The generals consequently decided that **W Force** must be withdrawn still farther to the south.

¹ Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand, *Operation Victory*, pp. 71–6.

Wavell thereupon returned to **Athens** justifiably concerned about the future of **W Force**. If the Greeks continued to fight the force must remain and play its part; it was morally impossible to leave without the assent of the **Greek Government**. And even if evacuation were possible, the examples of Narvik and **Dunkirk** suggested heavy losses in both men and equipment.

No decisions had been made with General Wilson about evacuation plans. ¹ But on 13 April before he left **Athens**, Wavell discussed the subject with de Guingand and arranged for the problem to be studied by responsible officers. The naval attaché in **Athens** thereupon advised ² Admiral Cunningham that evacuation was a possibility; on 14 April the Joint Planning Staff completed its plans; and on 15 April Cunningham was warned that evacuation would probably begin within a few days.

¹ ‘The first time I mentioned evacuation to Wavell was in a signal I sent after my meeting with Papagos at **Lamia** on April 16th after the latter had suggested it.’—Wilson to Playfair, letter, 19 Sep 1954.

² Commanders-in-Chief Committee, ‘Inter-Service Lessons learnt in Campaign in **Greece**, March–April 1941’.

TO GREECE

GENERAL WILSON DECIDES TO WITHDRAW TO THERMOPYLAE

General Wilson decides to Withdraw to Thermopylae

In **W Force** itself there was, as yet, no suggestion of evacuation; the all-important question was still that of withdrawal. After the discussions of 9–11 April when Wilson and Papagos had decided upon the line for ‘protracted defence’, their respective forces had begun to withdraw. But an undisturbed retreat by the slow-moving Greek armies was almost impossible. On 12 April Papagos was asking the British to send anti-tank guns to the Klisoura, Vlasti and Siatista passes, to use 1 Armoured Brigade in the **Klidhi Pass** and to provide motor transport for some of the Greek divisions. That night, however, when Wavell met Wilson at **Larisa**, there seems to have been no thought ³ of any withdrawal other than that already agreed upon.

The reports which came in that night and throughout the next day, 13 April, changed the whole programme. The road about **Grevena** was crowded with Greek troops patiently marching south; the **Cavalry Division** was still holding the **Pisodherion Pass**, but 12 and 20 Divisions were said to have disintegrated during their movement across the valley to the Klisoura and Siatista passes.

³ Maj-Gen R. J. Collins, *Lord Wavell*, p. 374, states that ‘... it was becoming obvious that **W Force** would not be able to stand for long even on the **Mount Olympus-Edessa** line. Accordingly, before leaving, Wavell and General Wilson discussed a further withdrawal, the administrative re-adjustments for which were set on foot at once.’ As **W Force** had then left the **Edhessa** area and was preparing to hold the **Mount Olympus- Servia** sector, it is therefore possible that the generals discussed the withdrawal to the **Thermopylae** area which was decided upon by Wilson and Blamey the following day. General Wilson, however, is convinced that the discussion was ‘just a general review of the situation’ (Wilson to Playfair, 19 Sep 1954).

These reports were probably too critical but they were natural enough, for the simple transport of the Greeks and the detachments of weary soldiers, base troops for the most part, did not inspire confidence. Wilson decided that the Greek GHQ was rapidly losing control and that the Greek Army could no longer be relied on as a fighting force. In this opinion he was undoubtedly unjust to the units remaining in the forward areas.

The other facts which influenced Wilson were the hesitation of Papagos before deciding to withdraw and the relatively slow withdrawal of his armies after that decision had been made. In his opinion 'the Greek C-in-C could never really bring himself to give up his successful campaign against the Italians.'¹ This was likely enough as other Greeks were of the same opinion. When it became known that **3 Corps**² was to withdraw, the Metropolitan Bishop of Ioannina protested. 'I then implored the army commanders not to carry out this fatal order and to act on their own initiative. This was declined as they considered it disloyal. General Platis (Chief of Staff, **Army of Epirus**) ... finally stated that he would only withdraw as far as the Greek-Albanian frontier and if he had orders for a further withdrawal he would not carry them out.'³ Papagos may not have known of these discussions, but he knew that his armies would be disappointed and was very appreciative of the dangers which would develop when his slow-moving divisions began their withdrawal.

That night, 13–14 April, Wilson discussed the situation with Blamey and, without consulting Papagos, decided to withdraw to **Thermopylae**. The preliminary moves would be made as soon as possible.

At first thought too much seems to have been abandoned at too early a date: all **Greece** was to be left to the enemy, except for the **Peloponnese** and the narrow strip between **Athens** and **Thermopylae**; in future there would be no co-operation with the greater part of the Greek Army; the British would move back swiftly in their motor transport but the majority of the Greeks would have to march 100 or more miles.

Moreover, **W Force**, now in position from the **Platamon** tunnel to **Mount Olympus** and **Servia Pass**, had not been seriously attacked. The Germans were certainly threatening the three passes in the mountains along the eastern flank of the Greek armies but the Central Macedonian Army and the **Army of Epirus** were still able, in spite of the *Luftwaffe*, to withdraw along the highway through **Grevena**.

¹ *Operations in Greece*, report by Lt-Gen Wilson, para. 54d.

² The **Western Macedonian Army** had been renamed **3 Corps**.

³ Rich, quoting narrative of Metropolitan Bishop of Ioannina.

On the other hand, many of the British commanders had never been confident of the ability of the Greeks to face the highly mechanised units of the German Army. They argued that courage and primitive equipment were no match for a modern army supported by an aggressive air force. To complicate matters, the collapse of **Yugoslavia** and the crisis in North Africa now made it impossible to establish a **Balkan** front and difficult for **W Force** to remain in **Greece**. As time soon showed, Wilson and Blamey had made the right decision. If the withdrawal to **Thermopylae** had been delayed any longer, even for one day, the greater part of **W Force** would never have left **Greece**.

The orders ¹ for the move were immediately prepared, but the urgency of the situation was such that nearly twenty-four hours before they were issued on 15 April several units ² had already received their instructions and were moving to build up the successive rearguard positions through which the main body of **W Force** was eventually to withdraw.

¹ See pp. 226– 8.

² See p. 237 (**Divisional Cavalry Regiment**); p. 238 (**6 Brigade**).

TO GREECE

THE GERMAN PLAN OF ATTACK

The German Plan of Attack

While these decisions were being made, Field Marshal List had hastened to adjust his plans according to the changes along the front. On 12 April, when one force had entered **Edhessa** and another was forcing its way through the **Klidhi Pass**, he issued new orders. *Eighteenth Corps* would advance upon **Larisa** from its bridgeheads south and east of **Veroia** 'with its main weight going through **Katerini**.' *Second Panzer Division* was therefore preparing to approach **Larisa** through the coastal gap covered by 21 Battalion ³ and through **Olympus Pass** in the 5 Brigade sector. ⁴

Fortieth Corps on its way south from **Yugoslavia** had 'to push 9 Pz Div on through **Kozani** and the **Aliakmon** sector' to the key town of **Larisa**. That was to be the major effort; and by the evening of 14 April its advanced guard ⁵ was beyond **Kozani**, with patrols across the **Aliakmon River** and approaching **Servia**. At the same time Field Marshal List, still sensitive about his open right flank, had taken good care to screen each gap in the western ranges. In the **Pisodherion Pass** west of **Florina**, *73 Division* was to force its way through towards **Kastoria**, but the major diversion was to be made farther to the south. The SS '*Adolf Hitler*' Division, with *5 Panzer Division* 'following up with all speed', had to fight its way through the **Klisoura Pass** towards **Kastoria** and to send from



The Planned Withdrawal to Thermopylae, 14-18 April 1941

The Planned Withdrawal to **Thermopylae**, 14–18 April 1941

there a strong battle group to Koritza in the hope that it might destroy Headquarters Greek Corps and force the surrender of the northern flank of the Greek Army. With his right flank secure he would then, and only then, despatch a force southwards through **Grevena** to encircle the Allied line.

³ See pp. 244– 8.

⁴ See pp. 260– 2.

⁵ See pp. 210– 14.

TO GREECE

14 APRIL: THE GREEK FRONT BEGINS TO CRUMBLE

14 April: The Greek Front begins to Crumble

The threat was soon apparent. On the morning of 14 April W Force learnt that 20 Greek Division in the Klisoura area urgently needed armour and anti-tank guns. Nothing was done to assist it, in fact nothing could be done, and before midday signals were coming through to say that the SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division had occupied Klisoura and was striking westwards through the pass. The Greeks drew up orders for an immediate counter-attack but the available reinforcements were so limited that the plan had to be dropped. All that could be done was to order the Cavalry Division to block the Kastoria- Grevena road against a possible thrust from the north. If the Germans broke south towards Grevena, 1 Armoured Brigade must halt them until another line was established to the rear. With these readjustments it was hoped that the Greeks could continue their withdrawal, 9, 10 and 13 Divisions of the Western Macedonian Army moving south towards Grevena and 11 Division on the western flank occupying the Metsovon Pass to check any possible attack from the Epirus.

TO GREECE

1 ARMOURED BRIGADE GROUP, INCLUDING NEW ZEALAND UNITS, WITHDRAWS FROM GREVENA, NIGHT 14-15 APRIL

1 Armoured Brigade Group, including New Zealand units, withdraws from Grevena, night 14-15 April

In the **Grevena** area the situation had naturally become more tense. On 14 April, after their withdrawal from **Vevi** and **Ptolemais**, D Company **1 Rangers** and 3 Royal Tank Regiment, now only one squadron strong, were screening the approaches from the north; B Company **1 Rangers** and B Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment were supporting the Greeks to the east in **Siatista Pass**; the rest of the brigade group, including 27 New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion (less two companies) and the two troops from New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, were immediately south of **Grevena**.

The day will always be remembered by those who were there for the many devastating attacks delivered by the *Luftwaffe*. Near **Grevena** three raids took place within an hour and a half: 'The road was littered with vehicles ... three English boys killed at the same AA gun (155 Lt AA Battery) no sooner was one gunner killed than another rushed to take his place ...' ¹ The New Zealand

¹ Atchison, **Divisional Cavalry**.



DISPERSION OF GREEK FORCES AND WITHDRAWAL OF 1 ARMoured BRIGADE, 14-17 APRIL 1941

machine-gunners who were farther south sheltering under the olive trees were also bombed and strafed but they suffered no casualties. The two troops from the **Divisional Cavalry** were equally fortunate when they were sent north of **Grevena** to cover the demolition of bridges, the move beginning during a raid and continuing with the attached engineers racing their truckload of explosives past the blazing vehicles along the highway.

The brigade had been led to expect another stubborn rearguard action, but as the hours passed Brigadier Charrington decided that the retreat of the Greeks from the passes to the north and the German attack upon **Servia Pass**¹ forced him to order an early withdrawal. The detachments supporting the Greeks in Siatista Pass were therefore withdrawn and that night the units, when ready, joined the line of traffic slowly moving south. Thus, when the **Divisional Cavalry** troops returned about midnight, the brigade was on its way to positions south of the Venetikos River.

The defence plans of **W Force** had in their turn to be adjusted to meet this threat from the west. An early air report that morning, 14 April, had certainly mentioned enemy vehicles moving westwards from Klisoura, but the strength of the supporting columns had not suggested that the main thrust was to be made in that direction. With the heaviest

volume of traffic on the road from **Kozani** towards **Servia Pass**, there had been more reason to think that there would be a drive directly southwards rather than an encirclement of the western flank.

Nevertheless, General Wilson had always expected Marshal List to order an encircling movement through **Grevena** or, if his column advanced still deeper into the Epirus, a still wider move from Ioannina through Metsovon and across the Pindhos Mountains to **Kalabaka**. To meet this threat, a brief survey of the eastern approaches had already been made by Brigadier S. Savige of 17 Australian Brigade,² who had arrived in **Greece** some days ahead of his battalions and had been sent to reconnoitre these possible lines of advance. On his return to Headquarters **Anzac Corps** on 14 April the question of a defence line was then discussed, Brigadier A. Galloway, General Wilson's BGS, pressing for the despatch of 17 Brigade to **Kalabaka**. The decision was made for them when it was reported that the Germans, having driven 20 Greek Division from the Klisoura Pass, were moving to cut the line of withdrawal of the **Western Macedonian Army**.

The orders for the assembly of **Savige Force** were hastily prepared. When they arrived at **Larisa** at 7 p.m., 2/11 Australian

¹ See **Chapter 13**.

² 2/5, 2/6, 2/7 Battalions; 2/11 Battalion of **19 Australian Brigade**.

Battalion and 2/5 Battalion (less one company) were immediately sent on to **Kalabaka**. The seven cruiser tanks¹ of Headquarters Squadron 1 Armoured Brigade, which had been exchanged for the two troops from C Squadron New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, came up that afternoon. Twenty-fifth Battery 4 New Zealand Field Regiment had already been established in **Olympus Pass**, but at 5.35 p.m. it received its movement orders and within two and a half hours was making an exciting night drive without headlights to **Elasson, Larisa** and **Kalabaka**.

Next day it came under the command of 64 Medium Regiment, which had arrived with one composite battery. In support there were also a battery from 2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, a company from 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion and 2/2 Australian Field Company.

¹ See **pp. 170– 1**. On 9 April they had left 1 Armoured Brigade, crossed the Aliakmon River, joined 2 NZ **Divisional Cavalry** and eventually were sent back to **Larisa**.

TO GREECE

SITUATION AT LAST LIGHT, 14 APRIL

Situation at Last Light, 14 April

On the other sectors of the front there was more confidence.

Emphasis was now being given to the fact that Australians and New Zealanders were once again fighting together. A suggestion that the two Dominions should provide a corps had already been made in March 1940, but there had been problems of administration and general policy which had made the authorities hesitate and eventually allow the proposal to lapse. On 6 April, when the different units in Greece had been united to form 1 Australian Corps, the romance of combined action in another April and in a country adjoining Gallipoli had caused General Freyberg to tell his Prime Minister, Mr Fraser: 'We are now linked with the 6th Australian Division; thus the Anzac Corps is again in being.'² He seems to have suggested that the official title should be changed from 1 Australian Corps to Anzac Corps, for the cable from Australia to New Zealand announcing the change stated that it was 'at the request of the New Zealand Division and with Blamey's full agreement.'³

The announcement to the divisions had been made on 12 April by General Blamey:

As from 1800 hrs 12 April 1 Aust Corps will be designated ANZAC CORPS. In making this announcement the GOC ANZAC CORPS desires to say that the reunion of the Australian and New Zealand Divisions gives all ranks the greatest uplift. The task ahead though difficult is not nearly so desperate as that which our fathers faced in April twenty-six years ago. We go to it together with stout hearts and certainty of success.

The message with this information had been taken to Headquarters New Zealand Division by Captain Morrison¹ of 25 Battalion, whose Bren carriers had been dispersed as part of an anti-parachute force about

Corps Headquarters. His story is more natural than the text of the message. He had been asked by Brigadier Rowell to wait while the message was being prepared. The Brigadier had then said: 'I'll let you know what is in it. It will save you opening it on the way home!' He read it and General Blamey said: 'There you are, sonny, you have only got to live till 6 o'clock to-night to be a—Anzac.'

There had been, so far, relatively little fighting for the new Anzacs but every effort was being made to complete the defences before the storm broke. The New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, having withdrawn ² from the plain about **Katerini**, was by nightfall behind 5 and 6 Brigades. Sixteenth Australian Brigade ³ had arrived in the mountains to the west; 4 New Zealand Brigade was established about **Servia Pass**; and 19 Australian Brigade ⁴ was still farther to the west adjoining the right flank of the Greeks. No orders for the withdrawal to the **Thermopylae** line had been issued, but the assembly of rearguards through which these forward brigades would eventually be withdrawn was already under way. **General Freyberg** had been asked to 'expedite the withdrawal of NZ Div Cav' to positions covering the western approaches from **Dheskati** to **Elasson**. His 6 Brigade Group, which was moving to positions between 16 Australian Brigade and 5 Brigade, was that night recalled ⁵ to form a rearguard covering the two roads between **Elasson** and **Tirnavos**.

² *Documents*, Vol. II, p. 7.

³ Acting PM, **Canberra**, to acting PM, **Wellington**, 22 Apr 1941.

¹ **Maj R. Morrison**; **Lower Hutt**; born **Wellington**, 10 Jul 1902; company representative.

² See pp. 235–7.

³ See p. 270.

⁴ See p. 238.

⁵ See pp. 237– 8.

TO GREECE

15 APRIL: THE SITUATION BECOMES MORE SERIOUS

15 April: The Situation becomes More Serious

The following day, 15 April, was one of disaster. Away to the north, the request of the Yugoslav Government for an armistice was to lead two days later to the official capitulation of that ally from whom so much resistance had been expected. The Army of Epirus was withdrawing with only slight interference from the Italians, but the **Western Macedonian Army** was already crumbling before the swiftly moving German armoured columns. In the mountains west of **Florina** the Greeks had not been strongly pressed, but farther south **20 Division**, forced out of the **Klisoura** and **Vlasti** passes, was withdrawing across the **Aliakmon River** to the **Neapolis** area. In the **Lake Kastoria** area, where the Germans reported stubborn resistance, **13 Division** and the **Cavalry Division** had held the towns of **Argos Orestikon** and **Kastoria** until late afternoon, but by nightfall the **SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division** had broken through to the **Kastoria-Grevena** road, thereby preventing any further withdrawals to the south. The two Greek divisions, together with **9** and **10 Divisions** which had been falling back towards the west branch of the **Aliakmon River**, withdrew south-west to the **Pindhos Mountains**. And still farther south **12 Greek Division**, which had retired from the **Siatista Pass** area, was assembling to the west of **Grevena**.

The day was also notable for a sudden increase in the number of air attacks. After the raid on the night of 6–7 April the bombing of **Piræus** harbour had continued 'until the port was almost wholly disorganized';¹ the minor ports of **Khalkis** and **Volos**, being possible bases for **W Force**, had been bombed and magnetic mines had been laid across the **Saronic Gulf**. But the **Royal Air Force** had still been able to patrol the frontier and attack the German lines of communication, even though bad weather during 8–12 April had limited its activities, especially its invaluable reconnaissance flights. Now that the weather had cleared it

was hopelessly outnumbered. German aircraft, transferred from **Yugoslavia** and operating from hastily prepared airstrips about **Prilep** and **Monastir**, were therefore able to begin that 'widespread, continuous and intense' strafing and bombing which was to continue throughout the campaign.

The **Royal Air Force**, now unassisted by a Greek observer system, was very hard hit. At dawn the Hurricanes at **Larisa** and the Blenheims at **Niamata** were badly damaged. The railway station at **Larisa** was bombed throughout the day, the civilian staff being so disturbed that the British were forced to provide crews to operate the trains. Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac, who observed the raid on **Larisa**, promptly decided that the few remaining aircraft must be sent back to the **Athens** area even if it meant that **W Force** would have to operate with less protection from the air.

The result was particularly noticeable in the Greek sector. First Armoured Brigade had left ² the **Grevena** area before midnight on 14 April, but it was not until the evening of 15 April that it was across the **Venetikos River**, no more than 12 miles away. The gorge south of **Grevena**, the sharp ridges, the corkscrew bends and the narrow bridges had encouraged a paralysing congestion of traffic. At dawn, 15 April, 'it was possible to see the road ahead packed with Greeks, Yugo-Slavs and British, military and civilians, motor, horse and ox transport, all intermingled, head to tail, and two lines

¹ Cunningham, p. 340.

² See pp. 219– 21.

deep wherever the road permitted it. An awful sight, made more dreadful by certainty that the arrival of the **Luftwaffe** would not be long delayed It was a clear, bright, sunny day and from about 0700 dive bombing and machine gunning attacks were continuous along the whole length of the road.' ¹ When the two troops from the New Zealand

Divisional Cavalry caught up with 1 Armoured Brigade they found the road 'a shambles of destroyed vehicles, bomb craters and all sorts of equipment.' ²

By 5 p.m., when the worst was over, 102 Anti-Tank Regiment and 1 **Rangers** were in position above the Venetikos River with the brigade taking up positions behind them. The Germans were now miles to the north. Fourth Hussars, the last unit to come out, had seen nothing of them and a patrol that was sent back that evening reported that the enemy had not yet entered **Grevena**.

Meanwhile, to the rear, in the **Kalabaka** area, **Savige Force** was preparing another line. Instead of a position near the junction of the **Grevena** and **Metsovon** roads, the Brigadier had chosen a sector some two to three miles west of **Kalabaka**, with the upper Pinios River on his left flank, a stream across the front and more open country on the right which would have to be defended in depth. The straggling Greek troops had already been cleared from the area; 2/5 and 2/11 Australian Battalions were preparing the line; the artillery were south of **Kalabaka**, 25 Battery 4 New Zealand Field Regiment being near the village of **Aimnades** and the medium artillery to the east of **Kalabaka** below the great cliffs which overlook the upper Pinios River.

In the afternoon of 15 April General Wilson had appeared, hoping to discuss the situation with General Tsolakoglou, the commander of 3 **Corps** [the **Western Macedonian Army**]. He failed to find the General but was able to inform Brigadier Savige of the withdrawal plans ³ to be issued by **Anzac Corps** at 6 p.m. The 2/6 and 2/7 Battalions and a company from 2/5 Battalion and 2/1 Field Regiment (less a battery), all on their way north from **Athens**, would not come through to **Kalabaka**. With 19 Australian Brigade, which would be withdrawing that night from the hills west of **Servia**, they would instead establish a rearguard ⁴ at **Dhomokos**, a town in the hills north of **Lamia**.

He also warned the Brigadier that his force must have on hand the necessary transport for a swift withdrawal. So it was arranged

¹ Waller, *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, July 1945, p. 171.

² Atchison, *Divisional Cavalry*.

³ See pp. 227– 8.

⁴ See p. 227.

that eighty ¹ trucks should be available from a convoy of 120 three-tonners which was coming through that night with 3000 Greek troops ² from the western side of the **Metsovon Pass** to the crossroads north of **Kalabaka**. The convoy, which included eighteen trucks from 4 New Zealand RMT Company under the command of Second-Lieutenant **Pool**, ³ came through successfully but the Greeks did not go into the line at **Kalabaka**. They cluttered up the forward areas and ‘added weight to the stream of refugee troops, mule trains and mule carts passing through from **Grevena** to **Trikkala**.’

Kalabaka, famous for its monasteries perched on the tops of pinnacles or clinging to the cliff faces, had long since been in a state of turmoil: ‘the straggling Greek troops, without food, took what they could from the shops and houses ... civilians took their current and reserve needs from the now-unprotected dumps, from which Greek troops had fled to join the procession eastwards.’ ⁴

¹ At the request of HQ **Anzac Corps** the number was afterwards reduced to fifty.

² They were probably part of 11 Greek Infantry Division, a reserve formation of the **Western Macedonian Army**, ordered to move by British transport to hold the crossings over the **Venetikos River** south of **Grevena**.

³ **Lt-Col J. Pool, m.i.d.; Te Kopuru, North Auckland; born England, 12 Jun 1904; credit manager; LO with SHAEF in Europe 1944–45; LO with British Army staff Paris, 1945–46.**

⁴ **Brigadier Savige, in Long, p. 103.**

TO GREECE

ANZAC CORPS DELAYS THE GERMAN ADVANCE; WITHDRAWAL ORDERS ARE PREPARED

Anzac Corps delays the German Advance; Withdrawal Orders are Prepared

In the eastern sector on 15 April the British units had been in close contact with the enemy. Above the **Platamon** tunnel 21 New Zealand Battalion ⁵ had to check the advanced guard of the unexpectedly large force moving down from **Salonika**; from **Olympus** Pass the guns with 5 New Zealand Brigade ⁶ had opened fire on a column of tanks and vehicles. In the wild country some six miles south-east of **Servia**, 16 Australian Brigade ⁷ was moving into positions after its long march from **Veroia** Pass. West again in the **Servia** sector 4 New Zealand Brigade ⁸ had surprised and captured a confident advanced guard; and still farther west across the river and adjoining the Greek right flank, 19 Australian Brigade and 26 New Zealand Battalion, ⁹ as yet undisturbed by the enemy, were hastening to establish defences.

At the different headquarters there was a corresponding sense of urgency that was intensified after 9.5 a.m. when Headquarters **W Force** issued its orders for the withdrawal to **Thermopylae**. To

⁵ See pp. 244– 8.

⁶ See pp. 261– 2.

⁷ See p. 227.

⁸ See pp. 273– 6.

⁹ See pp. 237– 41.

cover the withdrawal of the deployed brigades, four forces were already being organised to hold the successive rearguard positions: 1 Armoured Brigade, operating directly under **Anzac Corps**, in the **Grevena** sector; **Savige Force** in the **Kalabaka** area; 6 New Zealand Brigade south of **Elasson** about **Tirnavos**; and the not yet formed **Lee Force** at **Dhomokos** to cover the road and rail routes south of **Larisa**. The engineers would carry out maximum demolitions in depth along the roads and in the defiles. As for the Greeks, Anzac Corps would make every effort 'to ensure that GK forces do not withdraw on routes available to Imperial Forces, and that they do not in any way whatsoever hinder the withdrawal.' These arrangements were the responsibility of General Blamey, the inevitable political problems ¹ making it necessary for General Wilson to be in **Athens**.

Accordingly, at 6 p.m. that same day, 15 April, Headquarters **Anzac Corps** issued detailed orders. ² There would be two phases. In the first the rearguards would be established and the preliminary withdrawals undertaken. Sixth New Zealand Brigade, instead of linking 5 and 16 Brigades, would move to positions 'astride the circle of roads from **Elasson** to **Tyrnavos**' where, supported by 2/3 Australian Field Regiment, it would be the rearguard through which 5 New Zealand Brigade would withdraw from **Olympus Pass** and 4 New Zealand Brigade from **Servia Pass**.

Nineteenth Australian Brigade and 26 New Zealand Battalion would withdraw from the **Servia Pass** area, where they were to have linked **Anzac Corps** and the Greek right flank. Twenty-sixth Battalion would rejoin 6 Brigade; the Australians would be transported through **Larisa** and **Pharsala** to **Dhomokos** where, with 2/6 and 2/7 Battalions, a company of 2/5 Battalion and 2/1 Field Regiment (less a battery), all hitherto detailed to join Savige Force, they would form **Lee Force**.

Sixteenth Australian Brigade, which had been moving ³ through the mountains ever since 12 April and was now in position between 5 New

Zealand Brigade in Olympus Pass and 4 New Zealand Brigade in Servia Pass, would march out that night to the south side of Servia Pass, and from there be transported to Zarkos. There, with the support of one field regiment, it would be astride the Trikkala- Larisa road covering the withdrawal of 1 Armoured Brigade from Grevena and Savige Force from Kalabaka.

¹ See pp. 362– 7.

² The orders as outlined here include the operation instructions issued on 16 April. The decision to withdraw had been made on 13 April (see pp. 216– 17). In some cases, e.g., the movement of 6 NZ Brigade to Elasson, the Corps orders were the formal expression of verbal orders which had already been given.

³ See pp. 197– 8.

If these moves were complete by 8 a.m. on 16 April the second phase of the withdrawal could begin, with **General Freyberg** responsible for the front. On the night of 17–18 April, ‘subject to ability to disengage’, 5 Brigade at **Olympus Pass**, 4 Brigade at **Servia Pass** and **Savige Force** in the **Kalabaka** area would be withdrawn through the rearguards to the **Thermopylae** line, 100 miles to the south.

The following night, 18–19 April, 6 New Zealand Brigade from the **Elasson** area, 16 Australian Brigade from Zarkos and 21 New Zealand Battalion from the **Platamon** tunnel on the coast would withdraw, ‘**1st Armoured Brigade** covering the final withdrawal across the flat featureless plain of **Thessaly** on 19th April.’¹ In turn its withdrawal would be covered by **Lee Force** astride the road at **Dhomokos** in the hills to the north of **Lamia**.

All marching personnel would be carried in motor transport, the New Zealand Division following the road to **Volos** and thence along the coast to **Lamia** and through the pass at **Thermopylae**. The Australian Division,

continuing south along the main highway, would use the main road through **Pharsala** and **Dhomokos** to **Lamia** and thence to **Brallos Pass** in the mountains to the west of **Thermopylae**. The actual transportation of the brigades from the forward areas was a task for the reserve motor companies, of which 1 RMT Company, RASC, and 4 (New Zealand) RMT Company, less the vehicles attached to assist the Greeks, were with **Anzac Corps**; 2 and 308 RMT Companies, RASC, were retained by Headquarters **W Force**.

The Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport, Brigadier Collings, had already been warned that **81 Base Sub-area** was to move from **Larisa** to the **Thebes** area. So during the night of 14–15 April all the workshop sections with their heavy equipment had been on the road, and trainloads of base troops, ammunition and essential stores had left by rail from **Larisa**.

¹ 'Report on Operations **Anzac Corps** during Campaign in **Greece**, 1941.' In **Anzac Corps** Operation Order No. 1, 15 Apr 1941, however, 21 NZ Battalion is not mentioned.

TO GREECE

WITHDRAWAL OF 1 GENERAL HOSPITAL

Withdrawal of 1 General Hospital

Among the units which made this early withdrawal was 1 New Zealand General Hospital, which had been at **Pharsala** ever since 22 March. On the night of 14–15 April the patients were taken to a train at the **Demerli** railway siding, but the orders were countermanded and they had to be brought back to camp. The following evening, however, sisters, staff and patients were all evacuated. The sisters ² left in the transport provided by the Mobile Dental Unit. The 428 patients moved at first light, 112 convalescents walking with the staff to the siding some six miles away, and the others being transported in relays in the six available vehicles. The expected hospital train did not arrive, but one without an engine was made up from the wagons at the siding and, in spite of protests from the Greek transport officials, was added to another which came through from **Larisa**.

Once daylight came, those aboard had their exciting moments. There were air raids and the Greek engine-driver did not want to work, but a New Zealander and an Australian kept him to his task and in the afternoon of 16 April the train reached **Athens**. The patients and the majority of the staff went either to 26 General Hospital or 2/5 Australian General Hospital. The others ¹ went to **Voula**, where on 17 April they established a convalescent hospital at the Reinforcement Base Camp. Next day the sisters who had been billeted in **Athens** were transferred to houses in **Kifisia**.

² Eight Australian sisters who had been sent back from the north travelled with them.

¹ Captains A. N. Slater and G. R. Kirk, Lieutenants H. M. Foreman, J. Borrie and P. N. R. McDonald.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL PLANS HAVE TO BE CHANGED, 16 APRIL

The Withdrawal Plans have to be Changed, 16 April

On 16 April the Higher Command was at last certain of the order in which the enemy now proposed to play his much superior cards. The encirclement which General Wilson had expected from the west via **Grevena** and **Kalabaka** was certainly developing, not because it was a major feature of the original plan but because the commander of **9 Panzer Division** had made ² it quite clear to the commander of **XXXX Corps** that any frontal attack upon the escarpment above **Servia** 'would be pointless.' Consequently, when **59 Motor Cycle Battalion** had linked up with the **SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division**, it had been decided to rush **5 Panzer Division** through the **Siatista Pass** to become, once the bridge south-east of **Grevena** had been repaired, the spearhead of an attack through **Kalabaka** and **Larisa**. At the same time the main body of **SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division**, now in the **Kastoria** area, would be relieved by **73 Division** and hurried south to advance via **Grevena** and **Dheskati** to **Elasson**, 'with the object of getting behind the **Servia** positions and causing them to collapse.' ³ The one point to the advantage of **W Force** was that both these encircling moves demanded time.

It was suddenly apparent, however, that the more dangerous threat to the security of **W Force** was the German attack ¹ on **21 Battalion** above the **Platamon** tunnel. In the opinion of the Greeks, no strong attack could be developed in this wild country and their appreciation had been accepted by Wilson, Blamey and **Freyberg**. Attacks on 15 April and during the night of 15–16 April had been checked, but at nine o'clock next morning an encircling movement in conjunction with a frontal tank attack had forced the battalion to withdraw up the **Pinios Gorge**. **Eighteenth Corps**, with **2 Panzer Division** along the coast and **6 Mountain Division** on the slopes of **Mount Olympus**, was now threatening to break through to **Larisa**, the key town on the line of

withdrawal.

The moment General Blamey had clear evidence of this threat he realised that 21 Battalion must be reinforced. ² In fact he had, at 1 a.m., already despatched his artillery commander, Brigadier C. A. Clowes, 'to ascertain the position' and 'to direct the Battalion Commander as to his course of action.' His direction was that the western end of the gorge must be held at all costs.

Variations in the plans of **Anzac Corps** were accordingly made late that night, 16–17 April. Sixteenth Australian Brigade, ³ instead of going to Zarkos to cover the western approaches to **Larisa**, would now cover the western exit of the **Pinios Gorge**. Under the command of Brigadier A. S. Allen there would also be 21 New Zealand Battalion, 4 New Zealand Field Regiment (less one battery), one troop 7 New Zealand Anti-Tank Regiment and eleven carriers from 2/5 and 2/11 Australian Battalions.

In the withdrawal General Mackay of 6 Australian Division would be responsible for protecting the right and left flanks ⁴ of the New Zealand Division until it passed through **Larisa**. After that he would control the withdrawal through **Dhomokos** to **Thermopylae** of **Savige Force**, **Zarkos Force** and finally of Lee Force. First Armoured Brigade would cover ⁵ the withdrawal of **Savige Force** to **Larisa** and thereafter that of 6 Australian Division, under whose command it would then be. As **Allen Force**, like the New Zealand Division, was to withdraw through **Volos**, it would be controlled by **General Freyberg**. All engineers were placed under Corps control, with each force commander becoming responsible for demolitions on his section of the highway. If sufficient delay was imposed upon the enemy the following timetable was to be adopted: on the night of 17–18 April **Savige Force** would come back to Zarkos and 4 and 5 New Zealand Brigades would withdraw beyond **Larisa**; on the night of 18–19 April 6 Brigade would continue the withdrawal through **Larisa**. The subsequent withdrawal of Allen and Savige Forces would be decided by Generals Mackay and **Freyberg**.

The more detailed orders for the New Zealand Division had already

been issued by **General Freyberg**. As the first step, 5 Brigade on the night of 16–17 April was to pull back to temporary positions on the crest of **Olympus Pass**. **Duff Force** with anti-tank guns, machine guns and the carrier platoons from 6 Brigade was to occupy defensive positions about the road junction at **Elevtherokhorion**. Next day the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, less one squadron to the west along the road to **Dheskati**, would take up a covering position just to the north of the road junction. The following night, 17–18 April, 4 and 5 Brigades would withdraw. As 4 Brigade Group moved south, 26 Battalion would rejoin 6 Brigade in the **Elasson** area and 7 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, 6 New Zealand Field Regiment and 2/3 Australian Field Regiment would come under the command of the CRA New Zealand Division in support of 6 Brigade. The other units would turn off south-east at **Iarisa** and follow the **Velestinon- Almiros** road to the **Molos** area behind the **Thermopylae** line. The same night 5 Brigade Group would be taken to a staging area between **Velestinon** and **Almiros**. The transport would then return for 6 Brigade, the 4 Brigade transport returning to take 5 Brigade to the **Molos** area.

The **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** at **Elevtherokhorion**, 6 Brigade to the south at **Elasson** and 21 Battalion in the **Pinios Gorge** would hold on throughout 18 April. After darkness fell they would disengage and, with the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** in the rear, move back to **Thermopylae**.

² See p. 280.

³ *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division* because of rain and demolitions, did not complete this move. On 19 April, when the forward battalions were beyond **Milia**, new operation orders were issued. 'The enemy has abandoned the **Servia** positions under the influence of our flanking move, whose effect was beginning to be felt.' The division was then ordered to advance south-west from **Grevena** towards **Ioannina** to prevent the main body of the Greek Army withdrawing south.

¹ See pp. 244– 8.

² 21 Battalion was under the command of **Anzac Corps, General Freyberg** being occupied with the withdrawal of his brigades from the northern sectors.

³ Less 2/1 Battalion in divisional reserve.

⁴ In the event **Allen Force** came under the command of New Zealand Division and thus its right flank was protected.

⁵ See pp. 232– 3.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL CONTINUES THROUGH KALABAKA, 16 APRIL

The Withdrawal continues through Kalabaka, 16 April

In the Greek sector the roads were still clogged with traffic. On the night of 15–16 April a British transport company had crossed the Pindhos Mountains for another load of Greek troops. Lieutenant Pool, whose truck had broken down, had not gone with the convoy, but next morning he was sent forward through the mass of refugees with written instructions from Brigadier Savige for the company to disregard the Greeks and to return to **Kalabaka**. At the foot of the **Metsovon Pass** he met the trucks returning empty—the Greeks of their own accord had refused to move east. Once back at **Kalabaka** the company divided, the majority remaining attached to **Savige Force**, the New Zealand lorries returning to **Nikaia**.

At last light 1 Armoured Brigade, now the rearguard, was preparing to hold positions on the south bank of the Venetikos River. But at 11 p.m. its commander, Brigadier Charrington, announced that next day all units would continue southwards through **Kalabaka**. Accordingly, at 10 a.m. on 16 April the withdrawal ¹ continued, 27 New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion leaving at 2 p.m. and the rearguard at 3 p.m. Movement was just as difficult as it had been the previous day, but no effort was made to turn eastwards along the Karperon- **Dheskati- Elasson** diversion, which was still being screened by the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry**. Apparently no patrols had been sent to survey this route and the only information available suggested the danger of enemy interference.

The route was therefore south through Velemisti and **Kalabaka**, along ‘an awful road which had been bombed very heavily the day before. The effect of the rain on the damaged track, metalled only in occasional stretches was immediate and serious Maps were unreliable and the better looking of two routes petered out in a quagmire. Bomb holes had to be filled in. In places the road had been quite destroyed and

deviations had to be made frequently, while every vehicle that used them made the mud worse. Trucks which slithered off the mountain track and down the hillside had to be hauled back Everywhere lay the debris of the retreating army. Ammunition, arms and equipment, derelict vehicles, dead men and animals' ²

Movement was necessarily very slow. The leading vehicles passed through **Kalabaka** before nightfall but the main body spent the night in and about **Velemisti**, about 20 miles along the road. The rearguard had moved only five miles. Yet it had been 'a blissful day as it poured with rain the whole time with very low clouds, so there was no strafing on the road.' ³ As one machine-gunner said: 'It was the most marvellous move we made—over a mountainous area by roads which if we had seen in daylight we would have classed as impassable. One section of 9 miles took us 6 hours.' ⁴

Next morning, 17 April, as the brigade was continuing its withdrawal through **Kalabaka**, the question of its future movements had to be decided. General Mackay had hoped to use it in the country south of **Larisa** to cover the withdrawal of 6 Brigade. ⁵ The orders from General Blamey which arrived about midday were that the force should remain at **Kalabaka** to cover the
with-

¹ The bridge over the Venetikos River was left undemolished. Brigadier Savige sent back a British engineer from 292 Field Company, RE, who fired the charges. The Germans by that time were through **Grevena**.

² Waller, op. cit., p. 172.

³ CRME file.

⁴ Major P. W. Wright, 27 MG Battalion.

drawal

of **Savige Force**. But the orders from General Wilson had been that it should pull back into reserve at **Atalandi**, about 180 miles away and well behind the **Thermopylae** line. The solution finally adopted was that the brigade should leave a small detachment—a carrier platoon of **1 Rangers**, a troop from 102 Anti-Tank Regiment and 5 Platoon 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, the two troops from the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and the seven cruiser tanks from 1 Armoured Brigade—to operate with **Savige Force**.

The rest of the brigade group went on to the **Atalandi** area. At the Pinios River the traffic bridge ¹ had been unexpectedly wrecked but the column was diverted north to another, by which, in spite of air attacks near the river and afterwards about **Larisa**, it was able to join the main stream of **W Force** vehicles withdrawing towards **Thermopylae**. On the evening of 18 April the units were dispersing about **Atalandi**, 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion (less two companies and one platoon) going to an area eight miles north of the town.

¹ See p. 312.

TO GREECE

COLLAPSE OF GREEK RESISTANCE

Collapse of Greek Resistance

By then the Greeks had ceased to make any serious efforts to halt the German columns. On 15 April, after his failure to find the Greek commander at **Kalabaka**, Wilson had returned to his headquarters which were now south of **Larisa**. There he received a message to meet Papagos next morning at **Lamia**. Outside the town they met ² and discussed the situation. The Germans were through the Klisoura Pass and the Greeks were taking to the western hills; in **Albania** the Italians were pressing forward along the whole front. Wilson mentioned his decision to withdraw to **Thermopylae**, and Papagos, who does not seem to have known that the move was already under way, expressed his approval. To avoid further devastation Papagos also suggested that the British forces should be withdrawn from **Greece**. General Wilson immediately arranged that General Wavell in **Cairo** should be informed of the proposal.

The same morning Brigadier Savige was able to meet General Tsolakoglou in **Kalabaka**. As the straggling Greek troops were still hampering the efforts of the Australians to prepare defences, the Brigadier suggested that the Greeks should be organised and marched outside the areas in which fighting might take place. The General agreed but his vigorous objections to Australian engineers preparing demolitions on the road across the Pindhos Mountains to Ioannina suggested that he was 'double-crossing'. ¹ The Australians were not surprised when half an hour later the General and his staff left for Ioannina, the headquarters of the Army of Epirus.

That army, not greatly harassed by the Italians, had been steadily withdrawing but the senior commanders had shown no desire to make any heroic stands, particularly against the German columns. Convinced that their cause was hopeless, they had already on 14 April petitioned the High Command and the **Greek Government** to end the war. In the

Athens area Greek troops were now for some unknown reason enjoying general leave and wandering aimlessly about the streets. And the day that General Tsolakogloa left **Kalabaka** the Metropolitan Bishop of Ioannina, who was pro-German in his sympathies and anxious to save his country from the Italians, was urging the Prime Minister, **M. Koryzis**, to end the war.

² Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940–41*, pp. 379–80: ‘On the morning of April 16th I met Gen Wilson outside **Lamia** and after a review of the situation it was decided to order the withdrawal of the British forces to the **Thermopylae** position.’ The written order confirming this was issued in **Athens** on 17 April.

¹ Long, p. 92. These were the words used by Savige.

TO GREECE

THE OVERALL SITUATION

The Overall Situation

Elsewhere the situation was even worse. In North Africa the advanced guard of Rommel's army was approaching the border of Egypt while the main body was probing the outer defences of **Tobruk**. Its repulse on 14 April showed that the situation was not altogether hopeless, but this success was already balanced by expected but yet disturbing news from the **Balkans**.

On 13 April, the day that Wavell returned to Egypt, the Germans entered Belgrade. The armies of **Yugoslavia** were then in such confusion that on 15 April ² their commander asked for an armistice. So whatever the conditions in North Africa, it was essential that Wavell should in the very near future return to **Greece** and there decide whether the expeditionary force should fight it out or be evacuated by the **Royal Navy**.

² The capitulation was complete by 17 April.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 11 – THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION GOES INTO ACTION

CHAPTER 11

The New Zealand Division goes into Action

New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment Withdraws to the Main Defence Line

ON 9 April XVIII Corps (General Böhme) reached Salonika ¹ and was ordered to attack the Aliakmon line. Strong patrols moved out towards Edhessa, Veroia ('main axis of advance') and Katerini, but the swift advance of XXXX Corps (General Stumme) from Yugoslavia through the Klidhi Pass forced the Allies to withdraw ² from both the Edhessa and Veroia passes. The greater part of XVIII Corps was then diverted south towards Katerini and Mount Olympus. Sixth Mountain Division advancing from Veroia would attack the northern slopes in the sector held by 16 Australian Brigade; 2 Panzer Division would cross the Aliakmon River and force the passes leading to Elasson and Larisa, the key towns through which the forward brigades of W Force would inevitably have to withdraw.

In the original plans the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment was to have opposed the crossing and then, with a series of delaying actions, was to have withdrawn through 5 Brigade astride Olympus Pass. On 10 April, however, General Freyberg had warned Lieutenant-Colonel Carruth ³ that it was no longer necessary to get seriously involved. So when rain fell that night and left the roads almost impassable for heavy traffic, the armoured cars were withdrawn from their emplacements along the river bank and moved to cover the more likely crossing places.

On 12 April the observers on the hillsides reported sunlight flashing from the windscreens and then long columns of motor vehicles 'across the front to our left.' A Squadron from its position on the river bank opposite the ruins of the road and railway bridges opened fire about 2 p.m. on the motor-cyclists who were confidently leading the way. The troop hastily dispersed, leaving one man and two motor-cycles lying on the road. After that the Germans advanced more cautiously, but it was

¹ See p. 159.

² See Chapter 10.

³ Lt-Col H. G. Carruth, ED, m.i.d.; **Whangarei**; born **Whangarei**, 6 Nov 1895; solicitor; CO Div Cav Feb–Jul 1941; Comp Trg Depot Jul 1941–Apr 1942; wounded Apr 1941.

forming a screen along the northern embankment. At 7.15 p.m., when the forward vehicles of the columns were between Niselion and the demolished road bridge, one gun ¹ of E Troop 5 Field Regiment sent over the first two rounds fired at the enemy by the Divisional Artillery during the war. The Germans thereupon withdrew out of range to spend the night assembling their assault groups.

Their attack was launched next morning, 13 April, about 9 a.m. when concentrations of shells and mortar bombs fell upon the areas opposite the demolished bridges. A Squadron, well protected by the high floodbanks, suffered no losses and withheld its fire until the Germans attempted to cross near the ruins of the traffic bridge. Then, with the support of E Troop 5 Field Regiment, the crews opened fire with all they had—rifles, anti-tank rifles and machine guns—and scattered the groups attempting to launch kapok floats. One enemy gun received a direct hit as it was being loaded on to a float, several men were wounded, some ammunition was hit, ‘the detonations adding to the dangers of the crossing place.’ ² But downstream the enemy were more successful and by nightfall had established a secure bridgehead.

Long before then the New Zealanders had withdrawn. About midday B Squadron had come out from its position up-stream and moved back with the artillery to the anti-tank ditch some six miles away. A Squadron shifted east to watch the railway bridge, where the volume of fire suggested an attempt to cross in that sector. When no attack

developed, the squadron withdrew through C Squadron to join the others behind the anti-tank ditch. Thus by nightfall C Squadron was astride the main road overlooking the ditch, B Squadron was along a ridge to the west and A Squadron near Stavros. E Troop 5 Field Regiment was close to Regimental Headquarters, but 3 Section 6 Field Company, having fired all prepared demolitions, was well to the rear.

The night was undisturbed but at first light, 14 April, the Germans again moved forward. The *Luftwaffe* was no great menace, the few aircraft that came over being content to observe rather than to strafe, but the artillery which had been brought across the river shelled C Squadron in the central sector and covered the infantry when they left their trucks and scrambled across the anti-tank ditch. The tanks concentrated along the coast, groping their way through the minefield and eventually encircling the ditch. No further delaying action being possible, the force withdrew through *Katerini* to the *Mount Olympus* area. The artillery rejoined 5 Field Regiment; B Squadron *Divisional Cavalry* Regiment covered the

¹ The gun was commanded by Sgt W. F. McCarthy, who died of wounds on *Crete* on 21 May 1941; the gun-layer was Bdr R. H. Tebbutt, who was taken prisoner in *Crete*.

² Report by *2/38 Anti-Tank Unit* on operations, 12–14 April 1941.

entrance to the pass and the other squadrons withdrew over the pass. The three small bridges between *Katerini* and the pass were blown by a section from 5 Field Park Company with the CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton, present to check the results.

The carriers of B Squadron were then withdrawn, leaving the armoured cars astride the road. The orders for their withdrawal came over in clear from Colonel Stewart, GSO I. He asked the adjutant, Captain *Pigou*, ¹ if he understood *Haeremai*. That failing, he suggested

Talahena as a code-word; it was understood and the instruction was 'Put it into effect immediately.' Consequently at 5 p.m., when the artillery observers in the mountains were reporting the appearance of German vehicles along the road from **Katerini**, the armoured cars of B Squadron were through the lines of 5 Brigade and on their way over the pass to join the regiment in the **Dholikhi** area.

That night Lieutenant-Colonel Carruth received orders to move the regiment to the **Dheskati** area, where it would be under the command of **Anzac Corps** and responsible for the road between Karperon and **Elasson**, a route by which 1 Armoured Brigade might possibly withdraw from **Grevena** to **Larisa**. So next day, with N Troop 34 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment and the section from 6 Field Company, the regiment moved across to that area, where the engineers constructed road blocks and prepared demolitions to the west of the town. There were as yet no signs of any Germans, but during 16 April 26 Battalion and elements of 19 Australian Brigade came through after their exhausting withdrawal ² from the upper Aliakmon valley.

¹ Lt-Col W. R. Pigou, ED; Spring Creek, **Marlborough**; born Tua Marina, **Marlborough**, 18 Apr 1900; farmer; Adj, Div Cav, May 1940–Jun 1941; Chief Instructor, AFV School, **Waiouru**, Dec 1941–Dec 1942; CO Otago Mtd Rifles Dec 1942–Jun 1943.

² See pp. 241–4.

The Withdrawal of 6 Brigade to Elasson

In the meantime there had been further movements from the **Mount Olympus** sector. On 11 April, after the withdrawal of 6 Brigade from the anti-tank ditch to the crest of the pass, Brigadier Barrowclough had been told that until the situation was more definite his brigade must remain in reserve. Arrangements were therefore made for 24 and 25 Battalions to repair the roads to the rear of the pass, the former at **Livadhion**, the latter at **Kokkinoplos**. On 13 April, however, several moves had to be

made. In response to a request for reinforcements 26 Battalion was sent to support **19 Australian Brigade** in the rough country to the west of **Servia Pass**. The other battalions were made responsible for the sector between the western flank of 5 Brigade and the eastern end of the Titarion ridge, to which 16 Australian Brigade was now moving. Twenty-fourth Battalion would close the gap between the brigades and 25 Battalion would return from **Kokkinoplos** to a reserve position near **Ay Dhimitrios**. The move was simple enough for 25 Battalion but 24 Battalion, after hurriedly collecting mules and donkeys from the Greeks, had to start off at nightfall on 14 April carrying full packs, extra ammunition and two days' rations. At midnight, after the men had climbed 1000 feet and reached the beech forest above the Ay Nikolaos stream, orders arrived for their return to the pass.

The withdrawal of **W Force** to **Thermopylae** was now under way. Sixth Brigade, less 26 Battalion, and 4 Field Regiment, less 25 Battery,¹ were to establish at **Elasson** the rearguard position through which the brigades would withdraw from **Servia** and **Mount Olympus**. Fourth Field Regiment² and 25 Battalion went back that night to the foot of the pass; 24 Battalion joined them during the day. The move was continued after dusk and by 16 April the brigade group was preparing positions three miles south of the town on the southern edge of the small plain across which were the two roads to **Larisa**.

¹ See p. 222.

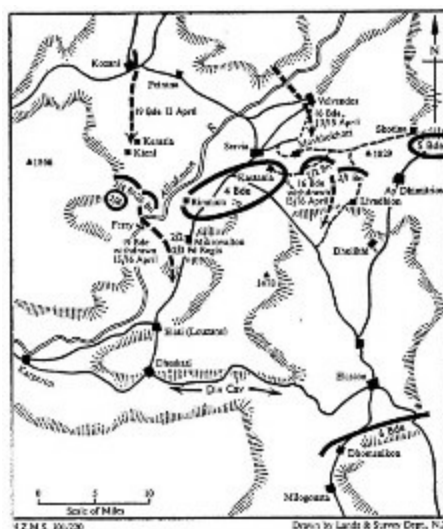
² See p. 259.

Movements to and from Servia Pass

In the **Servia Pass** area there was an even greater degree of adjustment and withdrawal. Fourth Brigade was busily establishing itself but on its immediate left flank there was always movement, at first to and then from the scrub-covered hill country on the right flank of the

Greek sector.

After the fighting in the **Klidhi Pass** area the defence of this gap between 4 Brigade and the Greeks had been the responsibility of **19 Australian Brigade**, whose two battalions had been taken through **Kozani** to Kerasia, a village west of **Servia** and to the north of Dheskati Pass. The 2/4 Battalion was on the high ridges about Kteni; 2/8 Battalion, still only 300 strong, had gone into reserve still farther south. Their transport had returned north to **Kozani** and south from there across the **Aliakmon River**, through **Servia** and west again to Mikrovalton. In this area where 2/2 and 2/3 Australian Field Regiments afterwards went into position, the vehicles were relatively close to the battalions but separated from them by the deep river valley and several miles of complicated hill country.



WITHDRAWAL OF 16 AND 19 AUSTRALIAN BRIGADES, 15-16 APRIL 1941

WITHDRAWAL OF 16 AND 19 AUSTRALIAN BRIGADES, 15-16 APRIL 1941

As there was still a great gap between the Australians and 4 New Zealand Brigade at **Servia**, 26 New Zealand Battalion on 13 April was brought up from the **Mount Olympus** sector. The battalion transport being away collecting D Company, which was still on its way from the **Platamon** tunnel, the whole unit was shifted by 4 New Zealand RMT Company. The Australians had entered the sector from the north, but as the **Servia** bridge was due for demolition the convoy went in from the south, turning westwards on the ridge above **Servia**—over which the

Stukas were diving from a bright blue sky—and eventually stopping about two miles beyond **Prosilion**.

The battalion was to come under the command of 19 Australian Brigade, but as it was still impossible to communicate with Brigade Headquarters the companies were sent to temporary positions overlooking the **Aliakmon River** and the village of Rimnion. With all equipment and extra ammunition, they scrambled down and spent the night digging in. Next morning, 14 April, they were joined by D Company, very travel weary after its roundabout journey ¹ from the **Platamon** tunnel. The *Luftwaffe* was busy strafing the road through **Servia Pass** but the quartermaster, Captain **Wilson**, ² went down with the rations towards the river and then back along the south bank to the battalion area.

Meanwhile Lieutenant-Colonel Page had received instructions by using the 11-mile-long telephone system between the Australian artillery and Headquarters **19 Australian Brigade**. The battalion was to cross the river that night to positions on the right flank of the Australians. There was, as yet, no bridge across the thirty yards of swift-flowing river, only an assault-boat ferry operated with ropes and pulleys, but the battalion was expected to be in line before dawn. The unit transport would eventually bring forward mortars, cooking gear, bedrolls and extra ammunition to the crossing or to Rimnion by any route the intelligence section could find.

The night, 14–15 April, had consequently to be spent shuffling down the five miles of slippery clay track to the ferry in which the battalion crossed, three men at a time. As the movement was not complete by first light D Company remained on the south bank, the other three companies going into line on the right of the Australians. Next day, to the sound of the guns about **Servia Pass**, they prepared their weapon pits and waited hopefully for the equipment and bedrolls to come forward.

The same night, 14–15 April, the left flank of 4 Brigade had been extended westwards, 20 Battalion leaving one company in its reserve

position south of **Servia** and going forward to reduce the gap between 19 and 26 Battalions. C Troop 31 Battery 7 Anti- Tank Regiment was under command to cover the approaches east and west of Rimnion, a company (less one, platoon) of 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion was attached and, as the artillery with 4 Brigade could not shell so far forward, arrangements were made with 7 Medium Regiment (one battery) and 2/3 Australian Field Regiment in the Mikrovalton area to give their support. But even then the front was not sound. Direct attacks could probably be held, but encirclement by German forces coming through the lightly held Greek sector to the west was always a possibility.

¹ See p. 176.

² Maj **F. W. Wilson**, MBE, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born Greendale, 11 Sep 1896; building superintendent; Canterbury Regt 1915–19; QM **26 Bn** Feb 1940–Jun 1943.

At the moment the problem for 26 Battalion was one of supply. The unit vehicles, long since dispersed along the ridge to the south, could not be brought down to the river. To get them to Rimnion it would have been necessary to rush through the pass into **Servia** and then back parallel to the river, possibly in the view of German aircraft and most certainly within range of their newly established batteries. The only other route was a rough track that ran down to the river from a monastery below the crest of the ridge and west of the battalion's rear headquarters. The Australians were already planning to use mule trains from there, so about midday, after Lieutenant-Colonel Page had insisted that his mortars and supplies should be brought up no matter how difficult or dangerous the route, Captain **Foley**,¹ officer commanding Headquarters Company, set out to find the track and explain² the situation to the Colonel.

On the way he overtook an Australian officer who had been wandering for hours in search of Brigadier Vasey's headquarters. The

operation orders from **Anzac Corps** had not yet been issued, but the Brigadier had already been warned to 'make every endeavour to get out by dawn, 16 Apr' and the liaison officer was taking forward the final orders. Hence Foley, after reporting to Brigade Headquarters, was able to advise Lieutenant-Colonel Page of the impending withdrawal.

The orders eventually given to Page were that his battalion must cover the withdrawal of the sick and the wounded, the medical units and, finally, that of **19 Australian Brigade**. Twenty-sixth Battalion would not move until 11 p.m., when it would cross the river and follow the track up the ridge towards the monastery. The Brigadier said that Australian transport would be available once the battalion reached the road, but if it were not, the unit was to keep moving. At last, after what seemed an age, the companies, already tense from the glow of flares across the front and the sound of shellfire about **Servia**, stumbled out along the ridges and through the scrub towards the river.

Meanwhile, because of the shortage of signal wire and the difficulties and slowness of other methods of liaison, there was much confusion at Rear Battalion Headquarters. Nothing had come through from Lieutenant-Colonel Page to countermand his orders that the urgently needed supplies must be sent forward at

¹ **Maj W. C. T. Foley; Waiouru; born Stratford, 7 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; 26 Bn, 1940–41; sqn comd 2 Tank Bn (in NZ) 1942–43; LO, Special Tank Sqn, 2 NZEF (IP) 1943; 20 Armd Regt, 1945; 2 NZEF, Japan, 1945–46.**

² The available signal wire was only sufficient to reach from Rear Headquarters to the foot of the clay track.

all costs. Major **Samson** ¹ had consequently sent the transport along the road to **Servia Pass** while he himself went down the clay track to the battalion. With Lieutenant **Matheson** ² in charge, the transport approached the pass, but it was soon evident that it could not get

through. Australian transport was streaming back and all forward movement was halted at a check point. The lorries were accordingly brought back to Rear Battalion Headquarters, where the drivers waited until first light, at which time Major Samson returned from the river crossing, where he had met Lieutenant- Colonel Page and received more definite instructions. All stores and equipment except petrol, rations, arms and ammunition were to be dumped and the lorries sent forward to await the companies as they struggled up out of the valley.

After leaving their prepared positions about 11 p.m. the companies had reached the river about 1 a.m. on 16 April. As Australian and British engineers had completed a bridge by 10 p.m., just as the leading companies of Australians were assembling on the northern bank, the crossing of the river presented no difficulties. With the exception of one Australian company which missed the bridge and had to use a small boat, the forces, Australian and New Zealand, crossed without any loss of time. But the Bren carriers, the lorries and the Australians' anti-tank guns had all to be abandoned.

The climb ³ from there to the monastery was only nine miles but the ridge was steep, the track muddy, and the equipment heavy. In all it took at least seven hours to reach the crest of the ridge and the trucks assembling on the **Elasson-Karperon** road.

But as **Divisional Headquarters** had not received any warning of the withdrawal there was no additional transport. And to complicate matters, some of the unit vehicles were small and others were required for the mortars, ammunition and heavy equipment. The majority of the 600 men had, therefore, to continue their way on foot. 'Packs, bedrolls, blankets, new two-men tents, and the **Naafi** stores bought four days earlier' were dumped, and while men searched for odds and ends among their personal gear 'the vehicles were organised in readiness to begin a shuttle service.' ⁴

At 19 Brigade Headquarters Lieutenant-Colonel Page had been told that his battalion would move east to **Servia Pass**, where it was hoped

that sufficient transport would be made available. But

¹ **Maj J. M. Samson, ED; Blenheim**; born Dunedin, 27 Feb 1904; company director; wounded 27 Apr 1941.

² **Capt J. E. Matheson**; Pahiatua; born Middlemarch, 7 Apr 1905; solicitor.

³ The Australian stretcher-bearers, much to the admiration of the New Zealanders, still managed to bring out the wounded.

⁴ **F. D. Norton, 26 Battalion**, p. 41.

because his transport column reported that the road was under fire above **Servia Pass** and that the B Echelon trucks of 19 Brigade had moved south through **Dheskati**, he decided that his battalion should do likewise. All gear, except weapons and essential equipment, was then dumped, the trucks were loaded with men and a shuttle service begun, with detachments being taken four or five miles and then left to march while the trucks returned for another load.

The transport followed muddy roads south-west to Karperon and then sharply east over the pass to **Dheskati**, the village to which many of the parties on foot had come south from Elati. The shuttle service towards **Elasson** went on with increased vigour. The weather, at first overcast, turned to unpleasant misty rain but it meant that no enemy aircraft disturbed the march. About 2 p.m., however, a shortage of petrol sent several drivers straight through to **Elasson** and left many weary men to plod along on foot and hope for the return of the lorries.

This made the withdrawal as arduous as any undertaken during the campaign. The men had dug in at **Riakia** on the night of 13–14 April and prepared new positions next morning; that same day they had crossed the **Aliakmon River** to spend the night of 14–15 April and the day of 15 April preparing fresh positions. Since then they had been marching for

another night and day, in all about three nights and four days of heavy work, little sleep and limited food.

In the afternoon of 16 April the weary files were given some encouragement when they marched through the forward detachments of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**¹ whose squadrons were strung out along the road between **Dheskati** and **Elasson**. All their available transport was rushed forward and by 10 p.m. the battalion was enjoying a hot meal about Regimental Headquarters at Valanidha.

The day had also been an uncertain one for B Echelon. In the morning Captain Wilson, the quartermaster, had left **Dholikhi** with rations for the battalion, but when he turned west from **Servia Pass** to **Prosilion** he found that the companies had climbed out of the Aliakmon valley and were somewhere westwards along the road to **Dheskati**. No information could be obtained as to their whereabouts; in fact, when he mentioned the problem to **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger** of 20 Battalion, that officer was surprised to learn that his western flank had been left unprotected. In the end Wilson returned and moved B Echelon back to **Dhomenikon**.

The late arrival of the relief transport takes more explanation. Apparently the wireless signals from the **Divisional Cavalry**

¹ See pp. 236– 7.

Regiment were not received by **Divisional Headquarters**, nor had Headquarters 6 Brigade received any report from the officers who were fortunate enough to return with the first vehicles. It was not until the appearance of the transport officer, Second-Lieutenant **Bethell**,¹ that the need for transport was explained and all available vehicles from 24 and 25 Battalions were sent out to find the rest of the battalion. They arrived in the **Divisional Cavalry** lines about midnight and soon had the companies with B Echelon at **Dhomenikon**. Next day, 18 April, the battalion rejoined 6 Brigade in the rearguard positions south of **Elasson**.

The Australian battalions, after they had reached the road above the river, were taken in unit transport to **Dhomokos**, where Brigadier Lee was organising the rearguard through which **W Force** would withdraw on its way to **Thermopylae**. The 2/2 Field Regiment and some groups from 2/4 and 2/8 Battalions made the long detour through Karperon and **Dheskati**, 'an action of which Mackay strongly disapproved.'² The gunners then joined the force which was assembling at Zarkos; the infantry eventually joined the rest of 19 Brigade at **Dhomokos**. Finally, after dark on 16 April 2/3 Field Regiment withdrew to **Elasson** to become part of the rearguard with 6 New Zealand Brigade.

¹ Capt R. Bethell, MBE, m.i.d.; Culverden; born **Christchurch**, 17 Oct 1905; sheep-farmer.

² Long, p. 102.

The Germans attack 21 Battalion above the Platamon Tunnel

In this period 14–16 April, when the rearguards were assembling at **Elasson**, **Kalabaka** and **Dhomokos**, the Germans launched three separate attacks along the Aliakmon line. On the coast above the **Platamon** tunnel they forced the withdrawal of 21 New Zealand Battalion, in **Olympus Pass** to the north of **Mount Olympus** they were checked³ by 5 New Zealand Brigade and in the **Servia Pass** to the north they were roughly handled⁴ by 4 New Zealand Brigade.

That towards **Platamon** was the most unexpected and consequently the most serious of the three attacks. In the morning of 14 April a train came through from the north and stopped at **Platamon**, the siding on the south side of the tunnel. The Greek general in control gave Lieutenant-Colonel Macky a certificate stating that this was the last train from **Katerini**. For the German armoured column had crossed the anti-tank ditch and the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment was withdrawing through the lines of 5 Brigade on the slopes of **Mount**

Olympus.

About 3 p.m. **General Freyberg** came up by train to explain the situation. As the Allied forces were withdrawing to **Thermopylae**,

³ See pp. 262– 6.

⁴ See pp. 272– 80.

21 Battalion must halt any attempt to advance down the coast and through the **Pinios Gorge** towards **Larisa**. With the country as rough as it was the Higher Command still thought that the most the battalion would have to face would be an infantry attack. The actual demolitions in the tunnel and along the track were now the responsibility of Lieutenant-Colonel Macky; for the evacuation of wounded the railcar on which the General had come up would be available.

Later that afternoon when the battalion was preparing to stand to, Macky called a conference of his senior officers. **Lieutenant Jones** was sent off with orders to fire all his demolitions at 7 p.m., but the conference had hardly ended before an artillery OP reported that a German patrol was scanning the front. It was then about 6.30 p.m., but **Jones** was ordered to blow his demolitions immediately.

The main charge in the tunnel had no noticeable effect but another fifty pounds of gelignite blocked the track and left a shattered roof, from which debris was falling at least a week later. The charges along the saddle track over the ridge were also fired and considered effective. The engineers were then sent back to prepare demolitions in the **Pinios Gorge**.

At the same time Lieutenant Williams had hastened to bring his guns into action, their 'heavy accurate shell-fire' ¹ forcing the German patrol to scatter into a grove of olive trees and hitting several of the distant vehicles, thereby inflicting the first casualties of the

engagement.

Nevertheless, the German patrol leader decided that the pass was lightly held; the British were holding the castle area but not the country behind it or on either side of it. His report, coupled with the sound of the demolitions which seemed to get farther and farther away, led the Germans to decide that only **Castle Hill** was occupied. ² The commander of *2 Motor Cycle Battalion* thereupon determined that an attack with heavy artillery support could be made next morning.

The divisional commander in his turn decided that two battle groups must be organised: *Battle Group 1* to enter **Olympus Pass**, *Battle Group 2* to force the **Platamon** position and advance up the gorge of the Pinios River. If they advanced 'as quickly as possible' they could cut off the retreat of the British units withdrawing towards **Larisa**. To bring about this spectacular success *6 Mountain Division* was diverted southwards to **Katerini**.

¹ Report by *2/38 Anti-Tank Unit* on operations, 12–14 April 1941.

² Report by *2 MC Battalion* on capture of Poli Kastelli. This was the German name for the castle at **Platamon**.

This explains the unexpectedly heavy stream of traffic which assembled that night on the plain below *21 Battalion*. The observers had early reported that there were many tanks, ¹ but the chances are that they were armoured troop-carriers. All the same, there was no doubt about the assembly of a large mechanised force. The successive signals sent back to Headquarters *5 Brigade* were that seven tanks had tried to approach, that there were fifteen tanks, that a convoy of thirty vehicles including tanks and troop-carriers had been sighted and that the enemy was debussing some three miles away. *C Company* from its position on the mountainside reported that there were 100 tanks, ² but Lieutenant-Colonel Macky when mentioning this to **Anzac Corps** cut the number

down to fifty.

Whatever they were it was an incredible number of vehicles to be approaching a pass across which there was a saddle track but certainly no well-defined roadway. The higher commands were inclined to question the messages: Headquarters New Zealand Division at first doubted if they were genuine; Headquarters Anzac Corps asked **W Force** for an air patrol to report upon the situation.

Next morning, 15 April, the Germans soon learnt that the **Platamon** ridge was more strongly held than they expected. There had been a short bombardment and the leading company of *2 Motor Cycle Battalion* was just beginning to climb **Castle Hill** when a 'murderous fire broke out from in front and from the heights further back on the enemy's flank. The company was pinned down and suffered heavy casualties, including its commander ... wounded.' The force sent up to neutralise the flanking fire was itself pinned down and forced to send out a patrol to find out just where the New Zealand left flank actually was. It eventually reported that it was high up the mountain past **Pandeleimon**.

The accounts from 21 Battalion confirm this story. The German advance through the dense undergrowth towards A Company on the ridge had faded out. Few of the enemy reached the clearing on the crest and those who did withdrew hastily, Lieutenant W. J. Southworth of 7 Platoon using grenades made by the engineers from sticks of explosive, detonators and safety fuses. B Company, higher up the ridge, had produced its disconcerting flanking fire and the Germans had gone to ground below the companies, leaving patrols to test the strength of the battalion front. Thereafter the New Zealand artillery concentrated on the neutralisation of the

¹ The German war diaries record no tanks in the area until the following afternoon, 15 April.

² Compare *2 Panzer Division* war diary, 12 April: 'There

seems to be two New Zealand divisions in position behind the Aliakmon with about 200 tanks.'

enemy batteries, in which work it showed a fine and necessary discrimination, there being no great reserve of ammunition.

In the late afternoon the Germans made a second attempt to crash their way through. The *I/3 Panzer Regiment*,¹ which had rushed south 'disregarding all obstacles' had arrived that afternoon, Colonel Balck then taking over the front and organising another attack. The whole battalion moved to within range of the castle and fired in support of its light troop, which attempted to follow the saddle track to the crest of the ridge. The fall of darkness and the 'terrible going' halted them below the New Zealand lines. At dusk, when the attacks had come to a halt and every tank had 'shed its tracks', the crews slipped out under cover of darkness and returned to the battalion.

At the same time the infantry, *2 Motor Cycle Battalion*, had attempted an encircling movement, two companies making a direct attack on the New Zealand left flank while another, after climbing still higher, outflanked the defences. The frontal attack had, however, been launched before the third company was in position. The fading light and the thick scrub added to their difficulties, so the attack eventually faded out owing to 'very fierce resistance and terrible country.'² The companies spent the night outside the village of **Pandeleimon** waiting to attack again at first light.

For 21 Battalion this evening attack was more exacting than the first. Above the tunnel the advancing tanks had been harassed by every available weapon: 25-pounders, mortars, anti-tank rifles and even machine guns, but it was the rough track rather than the weight of fire that had halted the advance.

Up the ridge outside **Pandeleimon** in the C Company area the attack had developed about 7 p.m. Private **Bosworth**³ had gone forward and observed the German approach, but the company was holding so wide a

front that it was impossible to arrange an immediate counter-attack. The infiltration continued, particularly on the left flank, where 14 Platoon had to be assisted by a patrol led by Lieutenant O'Neill ⁴ from 13 Platoon. In its absence a German patrol plunged through the company lines firing in all directions, putting up Very lights and whistling to each other as they disappeared across the ridge. No harm was done and in time O'Neill with his patrol and Lieutenant Smith ⁵ with 14 Platoon fell

¹ Arabic figures are used to denote companies and regiments, roman figures for battalions.

² War diary *2 Panzer Division*.

³ Pte C. J. Bosworth; Palmerston North; born Auckland, 21 Mar 1904; wine dealer; p.w. 16 Apr 1941.

⁴ Capt M. C. O'Neill, ED; Auckland; company secretary; p.w. 18 Apr 1941.

⁵ Capt H. H. W. Smith; Matatoki, Thames; born Waitotara, 11 Jan 1914; farmer; p.w. 29 Nov 1941.

back to be placed between 13 and 15 Platoons, astride the track into the village.

Long before then night had fallen and the attack had faded away across the whole front, but there continued to be a disturbing restlessness that promised greater trouble on the morrow. Very lights were going up, guns were searching for targets, and on the lower slopes German patrols were groping through the scrub. A Troop 5 Field Regiment was still operating but its weight of fire had been seriously reduced. The enemy had located one of the gunpits, a shell killing the sergeant and wounding four of the crew. In any case, with only eighty rounds left for each gun, the targets for harassing fire had to be selected

with the greatest care.

Away from the fighting line any large-scale moves made that night, 15–16 April, were on the German side. The *Battle Group* was reinforced, *I/304 Infantry Regiment* coming forward and *6 Mountain Division* moving high up round the eastern slopes of **Mount Olympus** to by-pass the Vale of **Tempe**. Orders were also issued for a motor boat, three assault boats and men from *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment* to outflank 21 Battalion by sea and sail up the Pinios River to the **Tempe** bridge, but, fortunately for 21 Battalion, a heavy swell prevented this movement ever taking place.

To the rear there was less uneasiness, although at the different headquarters everyone was now coming to realise that a major attack which could possibly lead to the encirclement of the force was already under way. Lieutenant-Colonel Macky in his last signal for the day had still been confident in tone: ‘tanks have withdrawn in face of our harassing fire. Present position quiet except for infiltration left flank. Casualties slight but finding it difficult to prevent entry of tanks.’ But there was a shortage of reserves and an overall uncertainty that was disquietening. Macky had suggested, with no result, that the demolitions to the rear in the **Pinios Gorge** should become the responsibility of **Anzac Corps**. The senior staff officer of **Anzac Corps** when visiting Headquarters New Zealand Division had discussed the possible withdrawal of the battalion by train, and **General Freyberg**, very occupied with the imminent withdrawal of 4 and 5 Brigades, had arranged for **Anzac Corps** Headquarters to take 21 Battalion under command.

21 Battalion Withdraws through the Pinios Gorge

At dawn, 16 April, there was the inevitable attack. Above the tunnel behind a barrage of smoke and explosive shell the tanks edged forward, forcing the withdrawal of 12 Platoon to the south side of Point 266. A Company above the tunnel was undisturbed, but D Company to the rear was soon under fire from the high country to the west about

Pandeleimon village.

Here 2 Motor Cycle Battalion supported by I/304 Infantry Regiment was threatening to encircle C Company. The full weight of their attack fell upon 15 Platoon on the extreme left flank. Lieutenant Mason ¹ began the day by shooting one adventurous German, but after that the platoon suffered a succession of disasters. No. 7 Section covering the track out of Pandeleimon had scattered some Germans who had been casually strolling out of the village, but the enemy had immediately reformed and attacked about 8 a.m., covered by mortar and machine-gun fire. Nos. 7 and 8 Sections were soon surrounded and forced to surrender; ² the other section of the platoon was overrun from the west, some survivors finding their way back to Company Headquarters under covering fire from 14 Platoon.

The reply to this attack had been a fighting patrol from 13 Platoon led by Lieutenant O'Neill, but it had soon been pinned down by small-arms fire and when it did get forward, mainly through the efforts of Sergeant Kibblewhite, ³ who was wounded three times, the remnants of 15 Platoon had already withdrawn.

The company commander, Captain Tongue, who had also attempted to reach 15 Platoon, had by then returned to his headquarters, to which 14 Platoon had fallen back after giving covering fire to the remnants of 15 Platoon. Once again there was danger of encirclement. The best that Tongue could do was to order 14 Platoon to withdraw down the ridge, covered by that part of O'Neill's platoon which had not gone out on patrol. Consequently, when O'Neill returned through the scrub with his party he found an orderly withdrawal already under way.

The move had not been unexpected by Battalion Headquarters. The telephone wire had remained intact until 9 a.m. when Captain McElroy, ⁴ second-in-command of C Company, had informed headquarters that the unit was completely surrounded. Macky had then warned his quartermaster, Captain Panckhurst, ⁵ that he must prepare for a withdrawal.

There was little hope of any improvement in the situation. The infantry who had enveloped C Company were almost certain to come down the ridge from **Pandeleimon** or to follow the track

¹ **Capt C. T. Mason**, MC; born Pukerau, 9 Sep 1915; school-teacher; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.

² They were afterwards employed digging out the rubble from the railway tunnel and carrying in telegraph poles as pit props.

³ **Sgt F. A. Kibblewhite**; **Thames**; born **Oamaru**, 3 Dec 1905; school-teacher; wounded 16 Apr 1941; p.w. 21 Nov 1941.

⁴ **Lt-Col H. M. McElroy**, DSO and bar, ED; **Auckland**; born **Timaru**, 2 Dec 1910; public accountant; CO **21 Bn** Jun 1943–Jun 1944; four times wounded.

⁵ **Maj G. H. Panckhurst**; **Waianakarua**, North Otago; born **Westport**, 1 Nov 1906; accountant; twice wounded.

from there to the railway station. The stretch between Point 266 and the castle, long under fire from artillery and tanks, was now enveloped in smoke, and German infantry infiltrating through this screen had already forced 12 Platoon to withdraw to the 11 Platoon area.

At last about 10 a.m. the tanks, supported by engineers to select a route, were pressing forward along the saddle track towards the crest of the ridge. 'Many of them shed their tracks on the boulders, or split their track assemblies, and finally the leading troops ran on to mines.' As every tank of the advancing troop became a casualty the path was soon blocked. When a detour was attempted two more stuck in soft ground and another was 'blown on a mine and completely burnt out.' In the thick scrub visibility was very restricted and hardly a trace was seen of the New Zealanders 'except of occasional infantrymen running back.' ¹ Still they were making appreciable gains which, with the encirclement

of the left flank, finally decided Lieutenant-Colonel Macky that he must order his battalion to withdraw otherwise it would be overwhelmed.

The decision came as a shock to **Anzac Corps** Headquarters. At 9.20 a.m. a message had been received saying that the battalion's left flank was seriously threatened. Twenty minutes later, and again thirty-five minutes after that, the message was more or less repeated. At 10.15 a.m. the last message to be received had ended: 'W/T Sta 21 NZ Bn closing down. Getting out.'

The order of withdrawal was A Company, then two platoons of D Company and finally, when the last of B Company was coming out, the hitherto missing platoons of C Company appeared from the upper slopes. They fell back through 18 Platoon D Company (Lieutenant **Flavell**²), which in its turn got clear with the loss of only one man taken prisoner. The troop from 5 Field Regiment, after searching for a medium battery alongside the beach, had already left for the mouth of the **Pinios Gorge**; so with the carriers detailed to cover them, the companies began to make their way back to the bridge across the Pinios River.

To their infinite relief this stage of the withdrawal was quite undisturbed. The enemy's tanks had reached the crest of the ridge, his engineers had begun to clear away the mines and the more romantic had hastened to hoist the Nazi flag from the castle tower. But the blown tunnel and the wretched surface of the track, which made it necessary for the tracked vehicles to be towed over, prevented any immediate exploitation of the situation. It was not until

¹ Report by *3 Panzer Regiment*.

² **Maj N. R. Flavell**; Dunedin; born **Auckland**, 17 Jan 1915; school-teacher; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped; reported safe 30 Nov 1941.

the following afternoon, 17 April, that the tanks were rattling along

the railway track towards the Pinios River.

To the **German High Command** this pause of over twenty-four hours must have been decidedly irritating. *Battle Group 1* to the north of **Mount Olympus** had not been able to force **5 Brigade**¹ from **Olympus Pass**; *XXXX Corps* had found it 'impossible to build a bridge north of **Servia**² because of enemy interference'; and the forces advancing through **Grevena** towards **Kalabaka** and **Larisa** required yet more time. The investment which was most likely to give the best and quickest return was therefore an advance from the **Platamon** ridge through the **Pinios Gorge** towards **Larisa**, the crossroads along the line of withdrawal. Consequently on 16 April, after **21 Battalion** had withdrawn, *XVIII Corps* was signalling *2 Panzer Division*: 'Please push on with all possible speed to Elason and **Larissa**. Very important to reach **Larissa**.'³

By then **21 Battalion** had formed another line. The first choice, a narrow gap between the hills and the sea about a mile south of **Platamon** railway station, was not reassuring. The battalion had consequently marched about six miles through olive groves and across sandy flats to the ferry across the **Pinios River**, at the seaward end of the **Pinios Gorge** about four miles from the coast. Here Lieutenant-Colonel Macky and Brigadier Clowes,⁴ who had been sent up by General Blamey to take what action he considered necessary, discussed whether the gorge should be defended at the seaward end, in the middle or on the edge of the plain about five miles inland. The defence of the seaward entrance was possible, but as it would have been comparatively simple for the German mountain troops to cross the ridges and encircle the pass, they finally decided that **21 Battalion** should withdraw to hold the western entrance.

Brigadier Clowes' instructions to Lieutenant-Colonel Macky were that it was 'essential to deny the gorge to the enemy till 19th April even if it meant extinction.' Support would arrive within twenty-four hours. When all the battalion had crossed, the ferry boat was to be sunk. Special attention had to be paid to the country on the north side of the river through which he expected the enemy to develop an outflanking

movement and, if the Germans did force their way through the gorge, the battalion would withdraw to the road and railway crossing some seven miles south of the western exit.

¹ See pp. 254–69.

² See p. 273.

³ *2 Panzer Division* war diary, 10–21 April 1941.

⁴ CCRA, *Anzac Corps*.

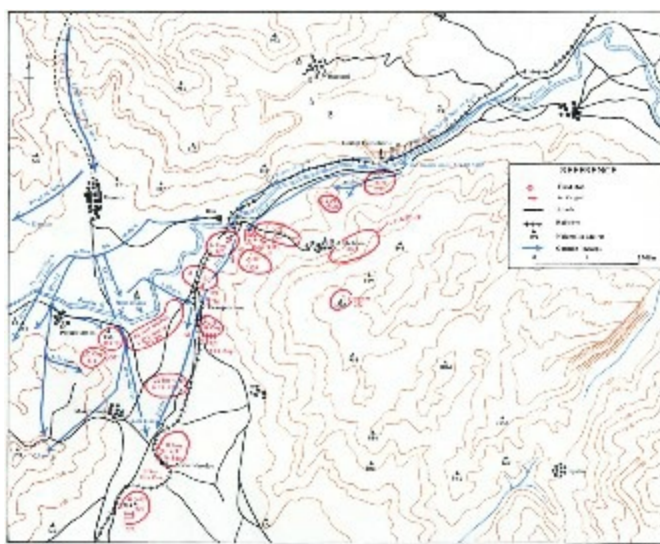
The guns were then uncoupled, manhandled down the steep slope and taken across in the ferry to the south bank, along which they were hauled by trucks which had been brought up from B Echelon. The heavy gun tractors, ammunition limbers and Bren carriers went back along the track, through the tunnel and over the railway bridge at **Tempe**, some five miles up-stream. As this took time it was not until late afternoon that all were across and the ferry could be sunk—but not before the unit pioneers had in a most gentlemanly way ferried across ‘a large flock of sheep and goats and then two shepherdesses.’ The first tunnel and the rail track were blown by the engineers and the weary battalion was then free to prepare its new positions.

The Transfer of 16 Australian Brigade to Pinios Gorge

By this time the disturbing reports which had been sent back that morning by 21 Battalion had convinced General Blamey that reinforcements must be sent to the **Pinios Gorge**. As 17 Brigade had been absorbed by **Savige Force** at **Kalabaka** and by **Lee Force** at **Dhomokos**, his only available reserve was 16 Brigade, which had marched the 35 miles from **Veroia** to **Servia** and then gone into position in the mountains to the east of the pass. The 2/1 Battalion on the right flank was in a world of snow and precipices about 5000 feet above sea level;

2/2 Battalion was south-east of Moskhokhori; and 2/3 Battalion was in reserve to the south of that village. On 15 April they were, like 6 New Zealand Brigade,¹ to have come down from the mountains, but the difficulty of getting messages through to them and the absence of any roads other than bridle tracks had postponed their withdrawal until the morning of 16 April when 2/2 Battalion, the first² out, had reached the highway south of **Servia Pass about 10 a.m.**

Here they had embussed and were about to move to the Zarkos area³ when a liaison officer appeared with orders for Lieutenant- Colonel Chilton to report to Headquarters **Anzac Corps. There he was told that the last signal from 21 Battalion had been most alarming and that Brigadier Clowes, who had been sent to find out what had happened to the battalion, had not yet returned. Chilton had therefore to hold the western entrance to the Pinios Gorge for 'possibly three or four days.'⁴ To support his battalion there would be a battery of field artillery, a troop of three anti-tank guns and the carriers from two battalions.**



The Pinios Gorge Action, 17-18 April 1941

¹ See p. 227.

² 22/3 Battalion reached the highway at midnight 16-17 April; 2/1 Battalion struggled out along the Fteri- **Livadhion** track to

Olympus Pass and came under the control of 6 Australian Division.

³ See p. 228.

⁴ Long, p. 97.

Chilton then hastened southwards. Outside **Larisa** he met Brigadier Clowes, who told him that 21 Battalion had already withdrawn into the gorge, and at **Tempe** he found Lieutenant- Colonel Macky, who described the positions now occupied by his battalion. As it was then dark they arranged to meet early next morning to discuss the deployment of their forces.

Before then General Blamey, still worried about the situation, had decided to strengthen the force still further and to place it under the command of Brigadier Allen. So when that officer reported to Headquarters **Anzac Corps** at 2 a.m. that night, 17 April, he learnt that he was to command a brigade group, the final strength of which would be 2/2 and 2/3 Australian Battalions, 21 New Zealand Battalion, 26 Battery 4 New Zealand Field Regiment, L Troop 7 New Zealand Anti-Tank Regiment, three guns of 1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, four carriers from 2/11 Australian Battalion and seven from 2/1 Australian Battalion. His instructions, given 'with the aid of a map and a torch', ¹ were to prevent the Germans entering **Larisa** from the east. As his first move he met 2/3 Battalion, still coming down from the mountains, and sent it on to the Pinios area. The 2/1 Battalion which was still withdrawing along the Fteri- **Livadhion** track became divisional reserve.

¹ Report on operations in **Greece**, 16 Australian Infantry Brigade.

TO GREECE

NEW ZEALAND DIVISIONAL CAVALRY REGIMENT WITBDRAWS TO THE MAIN DEFENCE LINE

New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment Witbdraws to the Main Defence Line

ON 9 April XVIII Corps (General Böhme) reached Salonika ¹ and was ordered to attack the Aliakmon line. Strong patrols moved out towards Edhessa, Veroia ('main axis of advance') and Katerini, but the swift advance of XXXX Corps (General Stumme) from Yugoslavia through the Klidhi Pass forced the Allies to withdraw ² from both the Edhessa and Veroia passes. The greater part of XVIII Corps was then diverted south towards Katerini and Mount Olympus. Sixth Mountain Division advancing from Veroia would attack the northern slopes in the sector held by 16 Australian Brigade; 2 Panzer Division would cross the Aliakmon River and force the passes leading to Elasson and Larisa, the key towns through which the forward brigades of W Force would inevitably have to withdraw.

In the original plans the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment was to have opposed the crossing and then, with a series of delaying actions, was to have withdrawn through 5 Brigade astride Olympus Pass. On 10 April, however, General Freyberg had warned Lieutenant-Colonel Carruth ³ that it was no longer necessary to get seriously involved. So when rain fell that night and left the roads almost impassable for heavy traffic, the armoured cars were withdrawn from their emplacements along the river bank and moved to cover the more likely crossing places.

On 12 April the observers on the hillsides reported sunlight flashing from the windscreens and then long columns of motor vehicles 'across the front to our left.' A Squadron from its position on the river bank opposite the ruins of the road and railway bridges opened fire about 2 p.m. on the motor-cyclists who were confidently leading the way. The

troop hastily dispersed, leaving one man and two motor-cycles lying on the road. After that the Germans advanced more cautiously, but it was impossible to prevent them

¹ See p. 159.

² See Chapter 10.

³ Lt-Col H. G. Carruth, ED, m.i.d.; **Whangarei**; born **Whangarei**, 6 Nov 1895; solicitor; CO Div Cav Feb–Jul 1941; Comp Trg Depot Jul 1941–Apr 1942; wounded Apr 1941.

forming a screen along the northern embankment. At 7.15 p.m., when the forward vehicles of the columns were between Niselion and the demolished road bridge, one gun ¹ of E Troop 5 Field Regiment sent over the first two rounds fired at the enemy by the Divisional Artillery during the war. The Germans thereupon withdrew out of range to spend the night assembling their assault groups.

Their attack was launched next morning, 13 April, about 9 a.m. when concentrations of shells and mortar bombs fell upon the areas opposite the demolished bridges. A Squadron, well protected by the high floodbanks, suffered no losses and withheld its fire until the Germans attempted to cross near the ruins of the traffic bridge. Then, with the support of E Troop 5 Field Regiment, the crews opened fire with all they had—rifles, anti-tank rifles and machine guns—and scattered the groups attempting to launch kapok floats. One enemy gun received a direct hit as it was being loaded on to a float, several men were wounded, some ammunition was hit, ‘the detonations adding to the dangers of the crossing place.’ ² But downstream the enemy were more successful and by nightfall had established a secure bridgehead.

Long before then the New Zealanders had withdrawn. About midday B Squadron had come out from its position up-stream and moved back with the artillery to the anti-tank ditch some six miles away. A

Squadron shifted east to watch the railway bridge, where the volume of fire suggested an attempt to cross in that sector. When no attack developed, the squadron withdrew through C Squadron to join the others behind the anti-tank ditch. Thus by nightfall C Squadron was astride the main road overlooking the ditch, B Squadron was along a ridge to the west and A Squadron near Stavros. E Troop 5 Field Regiment was close to Regimental Headquarters, but 3 Section 6 Field Company, having fired all prepared demolitions, was well to the rear.

The night was undisturbed but at first light, 14 April, the Germans again moved forward. The *Luftwaffe* was no great menace, the few aircraft that came over being content to observe rather than to strafe, but the artillery which had been brought across the river shelled C Squadron in the central sector and covered the infantry when they left their trucks and scrambled across the anti-tank ditch. The tanks concentrated along the coast, groping their way through the minefield and eventually encircling the ditch. No further delaying action being possible, the force withdrew through *Katerini* to the *Mount Olympus* area. The artillery rejoined 5 Field Regiment; B Squadron *Divisional Cavalry* Regiment covered the

¹ The gun was commanded by Sgt W. F. McCarthy, who died of wounds on *Crete* on 21 May 1941; the gun-layer was Bdr R. H. Tebbutt, who was taken prisoner in *Crete*.

² Report by *2/38 Anti-Tank Unit* on operations, 12–14 April 1941.

entrance to the pass and the other squadrons withdrew over the pass. The three small bridges between *Katerini* and the pass were blown by a section from 5 Field Park Company with the CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton, present to check the results.

The carriers of B Squadron were then withdrawn, leaving the armoured cars astride the road. The orders for their withdrawal came

over in clear from Colonel Stewart, GSO I. He asked the adjutant, Captain **Pigou**,¹ if he understood *Haeremai*. That failing, he suggested *Talahena* as a code-word; it was understood and the instruction was 'Put it into effect immediately.' Consequently at 5 p.m., when the artillery observers in the mountains were reporting the appearance of German vehicles along the road from **Katerini**, the armoured cars of B Squadron were through the lines of 5 Brigade and on their way over the pass to join the regiment in the **Dholikhi** area.

That night Lieutenant-Colonel Carruth received orders to move the regiment to the **Dheskati** area, where it would be under the command of **Anzac Corps** and responsible for the road between Karperon and **Elasson**, a route by which 1 Armoured Brigade might possibly withdraw from **Grevena** to **Larisa**. So next day, with N Troop 34 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment and the section from 6 Field Company, the regiment moved across to that area, where the engineers constructed road blocks and prepared demolitions to the west of the town. There were as yet no signs of any Germans, but during 16 April 26 Battalion and elements of 19 Australian Brigade came through after their exhausting withdrawal² from the upper Aliakmon valley.

¹ Lt-Col **W. R. Pigou**, ED; Spring Creek, **Marlborough**; born Tua Marina, **Marlborough**, 18 Apr 1900; farmer; Adjt, Div Cav, May 1940–Jun 1941; Chief Instructor, AFV School, **Waiouru**, Dec 1941–Dec 1942; CO Otago Mtd Rifles Dec 1942–Jun 1943.

² See pp. 241–4.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL OF 6 BRIGADE TO ELASSON

The Withdrawal of 6 Brigade to Elasson

In the meantime there had been further movements from the **Mount Olympus** sector. On 11 April, after the withdrawal of 6 Brigade from the anti-tank ditch to the crest of the pass, Brigadier Barrowclough had been told that until the situation was more definite his brigade must remain in reserve. Arrangements were therefore made for 24 and 25 Battalions to repair the roads to the rear of the pass, the former at **Livadhion**, the latter at **Kokkinoplos**. On 13 April, however, several moves had to be made. In response to a request for reinforcements 26 Battalion was sent to support **19 Australian Brigade** in the rough country to the west of **Servia** Pass. The other battalions were made responsible for the sector between the western flank of 5 Brigade and the eastern end of the **Titarion** ridge, to which 16 Australian Brigade was now moving. Twenty-fourth Battalion would close the gap between the brigades and 25 Battalion would return from **Kokkinoplos** to a reserve position near **Ay Dhimitrios**. The move was simple enough for 25 Battalion but 24 Battalion, after hurriedly collecting mules and donkeys from the Greeks, had to start off at nightfall on 14 April carrying full packs, extra ammunition and two days' rations. At midnight, after the men had climbed 1000 feet and reached the beech forest above the **Ay Nikolaos** stream, orders arrived for their return to the pass.

The withdrawal of **W Force** to **Thermopylae** was now under way. Sixth Brigade, less 26 Battalion, and 4 Field Regiment, less 25 Battery,¹ were to establish at **Elasson** the rearguard position through which the brigades would withdraw from **Servia** and **Mount Olympus**. Fourth Field Regiment² and 25 Battalion went back that night to the foot of the pass; 24 Battalion joined them during the day. The move was continued after dusk and by 16 April the brigade group was preparing positions three miles south of the town on the southern edge of the small plain

across which were the two roads to Larisa.

¹ See p. 222.

² See p. 259.

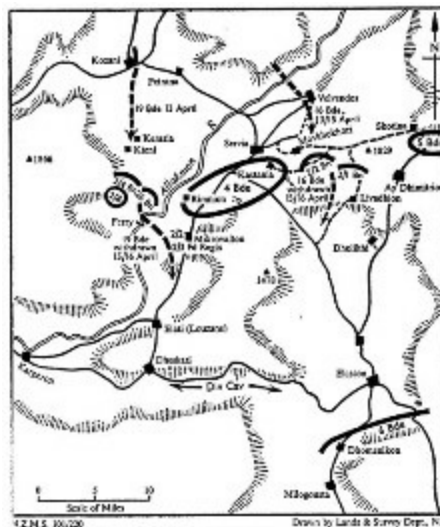
TO GREECE

MOVEMENTS TO AND FROM SERVIA PASS

Movements to and from Servia Pass

In the **Servia Pass** area there was an even greater degree of adjustment and withdrawal. Fourth Brigade was busily establishing itself but on its immediate left flank there was always movement, at first to and then from the scrub-covered hill country on the right flank of the Greek sector.

After the fighting in the **Klidhi Pass** area the defence of this gap between 4 Brigade and the Greeks had been the responsibility of **19 Australian Brigade**, whose two battalions had been taken through **Kozani** to Kerasia, a village west of **Servia** and to the north of Dheskati Pass. The 2/4 Battalion was on the high ridges about Kteni; 2/8 Battalion, still only 300 strong, had gone into reserve still farther south. Their transport had returned north to **Kozani** and south from there across the **Aliakmon River**, through **Servia** and west again to Mikrovalton. In this area where 2/2 and 2/3 Australian Field Regiments afterwards went into position, the vehicles were relatively close to the battalions but separated from them by the deep river valley and several miles of complicated hill country.



WITHDRAWAL OF 16 AND 19 AUSTRALIAN BRIGADES, 15-16 APRIL 1941

As there was still a great gap between the Australians and 4 New Zealand Brigade at **Servia**, 26 New Zealand Battalion on 13 April was brought up from the **Mount Olympus** sector. The battalion transport being away collecting D Company, which was still on its way from the **Platamon** tunnel, the whole unit was shifted by 4 New Zealand RMT Company. The Australians had entered the sector from the north, but as the **Servia** bridge was due for demolition the convoy went in from the south, turning westwards on the ridge above **Servia**—over which the Stukas were diving from a bright blue sky—and eventually stopping about two miles beyond **Prosilion**.

The battalion was to come under the command of 19 Australian Brigade, but as it was still impossible to communicate with Brigade Headquarters the companies were sent to temporary positions overlooking the **Aliakmon River** and the village of Rimnion. With all equipment and extra ammunition, they scrambled down and spent the night digging in. Next morning, 14 April, they were joined by D Company, very travel weary after its roundabout journey ¹ from the **Platamon** tunnel. The *Luftwaffe* was busy strafing the road through **Servia Pass** but the quartermaster, Captain **Wilson**, ² went down with the rations towards the river and then back along the south bank to the battalion area.

Meanwhile Lieutenant-Colonel Page had received instructions by using the 11-mile-long telephone system between the Australian artillery and Headquarters **19 Australian Brigade**. The battalion was to cross the river that night to positions on the right flank of the Australians. There was, as yet, no bridge across the thirty yards of swift-flowing river, only an assault-boat ferry operated with ropes and pulleys, but the battalion was expected to be in line before dawn. The unit transport would eventually bring forward mortars, cooking gear, bedrolls and extra ammunition to the crossing or to Rimnion by any route the intelligence section could find.

The night, 14–15 April, had consequently to be spent shuffling down the five miles of slippery clay track to the ferry in which the battalion crossed, three men at a time. As the movement was not complete by first light D Company remained on the south bank, the other three companies going into line on the right of the Australians. Next day, to the sound of the guns about **Servia Pass**, they prepared their weapon pits and waited hopefully for the equipment and bedrolls to come forward.

The same night, 14–15 April, the left flank of 4 Brigade had been extended westwards, 20 Battalion leaving one company in its reserve position south of **Servia** and going forward to reduce the gap between 19 and 26 Battalions. C Troop 31 Battery 7 Anti- Tank Regiment was under command to cover the approaches east and west of Rimnion, a company (less one, platoon) of 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion was attached and, as the artillery with 4 Brigade could not shell so far forward, arrangements were made with 7 Medium Regiment (one battery) and 2/3 Australian Field Regiment in the Mikrovalton area to give their support. But even then the front was not sound. Direct attacks could probably be held, but encirclement by German forces coming through the lightly held Greek sector to the west was always a possibility.

¹ See p. 176.

² **Maj F. W. Wilson**, MBE, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born Greendale, 11 Sep 1896; building superintendent; Canterbury Regt 1915–19; QM **26 Bn** Feb 1940–Jun 1943.

At the moment the problem for 26 Battalion was one of supply. The unit vehicles, long since dispersed along the ridge to the south, could not be brought down to the river. To get them to Rimnion it would have been necessary to rush through the pass into **Servia** and then back parallel to the river, possibly in the view of German aircraft and most certainly within range of their newly established batteries. The only other route was a rough track that ran down to the river from a

monastery below the crest of the ridge and west of the battalion's rear headquarters. The Australians were already planning to use mule trains from there, so about midday, after Lieutenant-Colonel Page had insisted that his mortars and supplies should be brought up no matter how difficult or dangerous the route, Captain **Foley**,¹ officer commanding Headquarters Company, set out to find the track and explain² the situation to the Colonel.

On the way he overtook an Australian officer who had been wandering for hours in search of Brigadier Vasey's headquarters. The operation orders from **Anzac Corps** had not yet been issued, but the Brigadier had already been warned to 'make every endeavour to get out by dawn, 16 Apr' and the liaison officer was taking forward the final orders. Hence Foley, after reporting to Brigade Headquarters, was able to advise Lieutenant-Colonel Page of the impending withdrawal.

The orders eventually given to Page were that his battalion must cover the withdrawal of the sick and the wounded, the medical units and, finally, that of **19 Australian Brigade**. Twenty-sixth Battalion would not move until 11 p.m., when it would cross the river and follow the track up the ridge towards the monastery. The Brigadier said that Australian transport would be available once the battalion reached the road, but if it were not, the unit was to keep moving. At last, after what seemed an age, the companies, already tense from the glow of flares across the front and the sound of shellfire about **Servia**, stumbled out along the ridges and through the scrub towards the river.

Meanwhile, because of the shortage of signal wire and the difficulties and slowness of other methods of liaison, there was much confusion at Rear Battalion Headquarters. Nothing had come through from Lieutenant-Colonel Page to countermand his orders that the urgently needed supplies must be sent forward at

¹ **Maj W. C. T. Foley**; **Waiouru**; born Stratford, 7 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; **26 Bn**, 1940–41; sqn comd 2 Tank Bn (in NZ) 1942–43; LO, Special Tank Sqn, **2 NZEF** (IP) 1943; 20 Armd Regt,

1945; 2 NZEF, Japan, 1945–46.

² The available signal wire was only sufficient to reach from Rear Headquarters to the foot of the clay track.

all costs. Major **Samson** ¹ had consequently sent the transport along the road to **Servia Pass** while he himself went down the clay track to the battalion. With Lieutenant **Matheson** ² in charge, the transport approached the pass, but it was soon evident that it could not get through. Australian transport was streaming back and all forward movement was halted at a check point. The lorries were accordingly brought back to Rear Battalion Headquarters, where the drivers waited until first light, at which time Major Samson returned from the river crossing, where he had met Lieutenant- Colonel Page and received more definite instructions. All stores and equipment except petrol, rations, arms and ammunition were to be dumped and the lorries sent forward to await the companies as they struggled up out of the valley.

After leaving their prepared positions about 11 p.m. the companies had reached the river about 1 a.m. on 16 April. As Australian and British engineers had completed a bridge by 10 p.m., just as the leading companies of Australians were assembling on the northern bank, the crossing of the river presented no difficulties. With the exception of one Australian company which missed the bridge and had to use a small boat, the forces, Australian and New Zealand, crossed without any loss of time. But the Bren carriers, the lorries and the Australians' anti-tank guns had all to be abandoned.

The climb ³ from there to the monastery was only nine miles but the ridge was steep, the track muddy, and the equipment heavy. In all it took at least seven hours to reach the crest of the ridge and the trucks assembling on the **Elasson-Karperon** road.

But as **Divisional Headquarters** had not received any warning of the withdrawal there was no additional transport. And to complicate

matters, some of the unit vehicles were small and others were required for the mortars, ammunition and heavy equipment. The majority of the 600 men had, therefore, to continue their way on foot. 'Packs, bedrolls, blankets, new two-men tents, and the **Naafi** stores bought four days earlier' were dumped, and while men searched for odds and ends among their personal gear 'the vehicles were organised in readiness to begin a shuttle service.'⁴

At 19 Brigade Headquarters Lieutenant-Colonel Page had been told that his battalion would move east to **Servia Pass**, where it was hoped that sufficient transport would be made available. But

¹ **Maj J. M. Samson**, ED; **Blenheim**; born Dunedin, 27 Feb 1904; company director; wounded 27 Apr 1941.

² **Capt J. E. Matheson**; **Pahiatua**; born Middlemarch, 7 Apr 1905; solicitor.

³ The Australian stretcher-bearers, much to the admiration of the New Zealanders, still managed to bring out the wounded.

⁴ **F. D. Norton**, *26 Battalion*, p. 41.

because his transport column reported that the road was under fire above **Servia Pass** and that the B Echelon trucks of 19 Brigade had moved south through **Dheskati**, he decided that his battalion should do likewise. All gear, except weapons and essential equipment, was then dumped, the trucks were loaded with men and a shuttle service begun, with detachments being taken four or five miles and then left to march while the trucks returned for another load.

The transport followed muddy roads south-west to **Karperon** and then sharply east over the pass to **Dheskati**, the village to which many of the parties on foot had come south from **Elati**. The shuttle service towards **Elasson** went on with increased vigour. The weather, at first overcast,

turned to unpleasant misty rain but it meant that no enemy aircraft disturbed the march. About 2 p.m., however, a shortage of petrol sent several drivers straight through to **Elasson** and left many weary men to plod along on foot and hope for the return of the lorries.

This made the withdrawal as arduous as any undertaken during the campaign. The men had dug in at **Riakia** on the night of 13–14 April and prepared new positions next morning; that same day they had crossed the **Aliakmon River** to spend the night of 14–15 April and the day of 15 April preparing fresh positions. Since then they had been marching for another night and day, in all about three nights and four days of heavy work, little sleep and limited food.

In the afternoon of 16 April the weary files were given some encouragement when they marched through the forward detachments of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**¹ whose squadrons were strung out along the road between **Dheskati** and **Elasson**. All their available transport was rushed forward and by 10 p.m. the battalion was enjoying a hot meal about Regimental Headquarters at Valanidha.

The day had also been an uncertain one for B Echelon. In the morning Captain Wilson, the quartermaster, had left **Dholikhi** with rations for the battalion, but when he turned west from **Servia Pass** to **Prosilion** he found that the companies had climbed out of the Aliakmon valley and were somewhere westwards along the road to **Dheskati**. No information could be obtained as to their whereabouts; in fact, when he mentioned the problem to **Lieutenant- Colonel Kippenberger** of 20 Battalion, that officer was surprised to learn that his western flank had been left unprotected. In the end Wilson returned and moved B Echelon back to **Dhomenikon**.

The late arrival of the relief transport takes more explanation. Apparently the wireless signals from the **Divisional Cavalry**

¹ See pp. 236– 7.

Regiment were not received by **Divisional Headquarters**, nor had Headquarters 6 Brigade received any report from the officers who were fortunate enough to return with the first vehicles. It was not until the appearance of the transport officer, Second-Lieutenant **Bethell**,¹ that the need for transport was explained and all available vehicles from 24 and 25 Battalions were sent out to find the rest of the battalion. They arrived in the **Divisional Cavalry** lines about midnight and soon had the companies with B Echelon at **Dhomenikon**. Next day, 18 April, the battalion rejoined 6 Brigade in the rearguard positions south of **Elasson**.

The Australian battalions, after they had reached the road above the river, were taken in unit transport to **Dhomokos**, where Brigadier Lee was organising the rearguard through which **W Force** would withdraw on its way to **Thermopylae**. The 2/2 Field Regiment and some groups from 2/4 and 2/8 Battalions made the long detour through Karperon and **Dheskati**, 'an action of which Mackay strongly disapproved.'² The gunners then joined the force which was assembling at Zarkos; the infantry eventually joined the rest of 19 Brigade at **Dhomokos**. Finally, after dark on 16 April 2/3 Field Regiment withdrew to **Elasson** to become part of the rearguard with 6 New Zealand Brigade.

¹ **Capt R. Bethell**, MBE, m.i.d.; Culverden; born **Christchurch**, 17 Oct 1905; sheep-farmer.

² Long, p. 102.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS ATTACK 21 BATTALION ABOVE THE PLATAMON TUNNEL

The Germans attack 21 Battalion above the Platamon Tunnel

In this period 14–16 April, when the rearguards were assembling at **Elasson**, **Kalabaka** and **Dhomokos**, the Germans launched three separate attacks along the **Aliakmon** line. On the coast above the **Platamon** tunnel they forced the withdrawal of 21 New Zealand Battalion, in **Olympus Pass** to the north of **Mount Olympus** they were checked ³ by 5 New Zealand Brigade and in the **Servia Pass** to the north they were roughly handled ⁴ by 4 New Zealand Brigade.

That towards **Platamon** was the most unexpected and consequently the most serious of the three attacks. In the morning of 14 April a train came through from the north and stopped at **Platamon**, the siding on the south side of the tunnel. The Greek general in control gave Lieutenant-Colonel Macky a certificate stating that this was the last train from **Katerini**. For the German armoured column had crossed the anti-tank ditch and the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment was withdrawing through the lines of 5 Brigade on the slopes of **Mount Olympus**.

About 3 p.m. **General Freyberg** came up by train to explain the situation. As the Allied forces were withdrawing to **Thermopylae**,

³ See pp. 262– 6.

⁴ See pp. 272– 80.

21 Battalion must halt any attempt to advance down the coast and through the **Pinios Gorge** towards **Larisa**. With the country as rough as it was the Higher Command still thought that the most the battalion would have to face would be an infantry attack. The actual demolitions

in the tunnel and along the track were now the responsibility of Lieutenant-Colonel Macky; for the evacuation of wounded the railcar on which the General had come up would be available.

Later that afternoon when the battalion was preparing to stand to, Macky called a conference of his senior officers. **Lieutenant Jones** was sent off with orders to fire all his demolitions at 7 p.m., but the conference had hardly ended before an artillery OP reported that a German patrol was scanning the front. It was then about 6.30 p.m., but **Jones** was ordered to blow his demolitions immediately.

The main charge in the tunnel had no noticeable effect but another fifty pounds of gelignite blocked the track and left a shattered roof, from which debris was falling at least a week later. The charges along the saddle track over the ridge were also fired and considered effective. The engineers were then sent back to prepare demolitions in the **Pinios Gorge**.

At the same time Lieutenant Williams had hastened to bring his guns into action, their 'heavy accurate shell-fire' ¹ forcing the German patrol to scatter into a grove of olive trees and hitting several of the distant vehicles, thereby inflicting the first casualties of the engagement.

Nevertheless, the German patrol leader decided that the pass was lightly held; the British were holding the castle area but not the country behind it or on either side of it. His report, coupled with the sound of the demolitions which seemed to get farther and farther away, led the Germans to decide that only **Castle Hill** was occupied. ² The commander of *2 Motor Cycle Battalion* thereupon determined that an attack with heavy artillery support could be made next morning.

The divisional commander in his turn decided that two battle groups must be organised: *Battle Group 1* to enter **Olympus Pass**, *Battle Group 2* to force the **Platamon** position and advance up the gorge of the Pinios River. If they advanced 'as quickly as possible' they could cut off the

retreat of the British units withdrawing towards **Larisa**. To bring about this spectacular success *6 Mountain Division* was diverted southwards to **Katerini**.

¹ Report by *2/38 Anti-Tank Unit* on operations, 12–14 April 1941.

² Report by *2 MC Battalion* on capture of Poli Kastelli. This was the German name for the castle at **Platamon**.

This explains the unexpectedly heavy stream of traffic which assembled that night on the plain below 21 Battalion. The observers had early reported that there were many tanks, ¹ but the chances are that they were armoured troop-carriers. All the same, there was no doubt about the assembly of a large mechanised force. The successive signals sent back to Headquarters 5 Brigade were that seven tanks had tried to approach, that there were fifteen tanks, that a convoy of thirty vehicles including tanks and troop-carriers had been sighted and that the enemy was debussing some three miles away. C Company from its position on the mountainside reported that there were 100 tanks, ² but Lieutenant-Colonel Macky when mentioning this to **Anzac Corps** cut the number down to fifty.

Whatever they were it was an incredible number of vehicles to be approaching a pass across which there was a saddle track but certainly no well-defined roadway. The higher commands were inclined to question the messages: Headquarters New Zealand Division at first doubted if they were genuine; Headquarters Anzac Corps asked **W Force** for an air patrol to report upon the situation.

Next morning, 15 April, the Germans soon learnt that the **Platamon** ridge was more strongly held than they expected. There had been a short bombardment and the leading company of *2 Motor Cycle Battalion* was just beginning to climb **Castle Hill** when a 'murderous fire broke out from in front and from the heights further back on the enemy's flank.

The company was pinned down and suffered heavy casualties, including its commander ... wounded.’ The force sent up to neutralise the flanking fire was itself pinned down and forced to send out a patrol to find out just where the New Zealand left flank actually was. It eventually reported that it was high up the mountain past [Pandeleimon](#).

The accounts from 21 Battalion confirm this story. The German advance through the dense undergrowth towards A Company on the ridge had faded out. Few of the enemy reached the clearing on the crest and those who did withdrew hastily, Lieutenant W. J. Southworth of 7 Platoon using grenades made by the engineers from sticks of explosive, detonators and safety fuses. B Company, higher up the ridge, had produced its disconcerting flanking fire and the Germans had gone to ground below the companies, leaving patrols to test the strength of the battalion front. Thereafter the New Zealand artillery concentrated on the neutralisation of the

¹ The German war diaries record no tanks in the area until the following afternoon, 15 April.

² Compare [2 Panzer Division](#) war diary, 12 April: ‘There seems to be two New Zealand divisions in position behind the Aliakmon with about 200 tanks.’

enemy batteries, in which work it showed a fine and necessary discrimination, there being no great reserve of ammunition.

In the late afternoon the Germans made a second attempt to crash their way through. The *I/3 Panzer Regiment*, ¹ which had rushed south ‘disregarding all obstacles’ had arrived that afternoon, Colonel Balck then taking over the front and organising another attack. The whole battalion moved to within range of the castle and fired in support of its light troop, which attempted to follow the saddle track to the crest of the ridge. The fall of darkness and the ‘terrible going’ halted them below the New Zealand lines. At dusk, when the attacks had come to a halt

and every tank had 'shed its tracks', the crews slipped out under cover of darkness and returned to the battalion.

At the same time the infantry, *2 Motor Cycle Battalion*, had attempted an encircling movement, two companies making a direct attack on the New Zealand left flank while another, after climbing still higher, outflanked the defences. The frontal attack had, however, been launched before the third company was in position. The fading light and the thick scrub added to their difficulties, so the attack eventually faded out owing to 'very fierce resistance and terrible country.'² The companies spent the night outside the village of **Pandeleimon** waiting to attack again at first light.

For 21 Battalion this evening attack was more exacting than the first. Above the tunnel the advancing tanks had been harassed by every available weapon: 25-pounders, mortars, anti-tank rifles and even machine guns, but it was the rough track rather than the weight of fire that had halted the advance.

Up the ridge outside **Pandeleimon** in the C Company area the attack had developed about 7 p.m. Private **Bosworth**³ had gone forward and observed the German approach, but the company was holding so wide a front that it was impossible to arrange an immediate counter-attack. The infiltration continued, particularly on the left flank, where 14 Platoon had to be assisted by a patrol led by Lieutenant O'Neill⁴ from 13 Platoon. In its absence a German patrol plunged through the company lines firing in all directions, putting up Very lights and whistling to each other as they disappeared across the ridge. No harm was done and in time O'Neill with his patrol and Lieutenant **Smith**⁵ with 14 Platoon fell

¹ Arabic figures are used to denote companies and regiments, roman figures for battalions.

² War diary *2 Panzer Division*.

³ **Pte C. J. Bosworth; Palmerston North; born Auckland, 21 Mar 1904; wine dealer; p.w. 16 Apr 1941.**

⁴ **Capt M. C. O'Neill, ED; Auckland; company secretary; p.w. 18 Apr 1941.**

⁵ **Capt H. H. W. Smith; Matatoki, Thames; born Waitotara, 11 Jan 1914; farmer; p.w. 29 Nov 1941.**

back to be placed between 13 and 15 Platoons, astride the track into the village.

Long before then night had fallen and the attack had faded away across the whole front, but there continued to be a disturbing restlessness that promised greater trouble on the morrow. Very lights were going up, guns were searching for targets, and on the lower slopes German patrols were groping through the scrub. A Troop 5 Field Regiment was still operating but its weight of fire had been seriously reduced. The enemy had located one of the gunpits, a shell killing the sergeant and wounding four of the crew. In any case, with only eighty rounds left for each gun, the targets for harassing fire had to be selected with the greatest care.

Away from the fighting line any large-scale moves made that night, 15–16 April, were on the German side. The *Battle Group* was reinforced, *I/304 Infantry Regiment* coming forward and *6 Mountain Division* moving high up round the eastern slopes of **Mount Olympus** to by-pass the Vale of **Tempe**. Orders were also issued for a motor boat, three assault boats and men from *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment* to outflank 21 Battalion by sea and sail up the Pinios River to the **Tempe** bridge, but, fortunately for 21 Battalion, a heavy swell prevented this movement ever taking place.

To the rear there was less uneasiness, although at the different headquarters everyone was now coming to realise that a major attack

which could possibly lead to the encirclement of the force was already under way. Lieutenant-Colonel Macky in his last signal for the day had still been confident in tone: 'tanks have withdrawn in face of our harassing fire. Present position quiet except for infiltration left flank. Casualties slight but finding it difficult to prevent entry of tanks.' But there was a shortage of reserves and an overall uncertainty that was disquietening. Macky had suggested, with no result, that the demolitions to the rear in the **Pinios Gorge** should become the responsibility of **Anzac Corps**. The senior staff officer of **Anzac Corps** when visiting Headquarters New Zealand Division had discussed the possible withdrawal of the battalion by train, and **General Freyberg**, very occupied with the imminent withdrawal of 4 and 5 Brigades, had arranged for **Anzac Corps** Headquarters to take 21 Battalion under command.

TO GREECE

21 BATTALION WITHDRAWS THROUGH THE PINIOS GORGE

21 Battalion Withdraws through the Pinios Gorge

At dawn, 16 April, there was the inevitable attack. Above the tunnel behind a barrage of smoke and explosive shell the tanks edged forward, forcing the withdrawal of 12 Platoon to the south side of Point 266. A Company above the tunnel was undisturbed, but D Company to the rear was soon under fire from the high country to the west about **Pandeleimon** village.

Here *2 Motor Cycle Battalion* supported by *I/304 Infantry Regiment* was threatening to encircle C Company. The full weight of their attack fell upon 15 Platoon on the extreme left flank. Lieutenant **Mason**¹ began the day by shooting one adventurous German, but after that the platoon suffered a succession of disasters. No. 7 Section covering the track out of **Pandeleimon** had scattered some Germans who had been casually strolling out of the village, but the enemy had immediately reformed and attacked about 8 a.m., covered by mortar and machine-gun fire. Nos. 7 and 8 Sections were soon surrounded and forced to surrender;² the other section of the platoon was overrun from the west, some survivors finding their way back to Company Headquarters under covering fire from 14 Platoon.

The reply to this attack had been a fighting patrol from 13 Platoon led by Lieutenant O'Neill, but it had soon been pinned down by small-arms fire and when it did get forward, mainly through the efforts of Sergeant **Kibblewhite**,³ who was wounded three times, the remnants of 15 Platoon had already withdrawn.

The company commander, Captain Tongue, who had also attempted to reach 15 Platoon, had by then returned to his headquarters, to which 14 Platoon had fallen back after giving covering fire to the remnants of 15 Platoon. Once again there was danger of encirclement. The best that

Tongue could do was to order 14 Platoon to withdraw down the ridge, covered by that part of O'Neill's platoon which had not gone out on patrol. Consequently, when O'Neill returned through the scrub with his party he found an orderly withdrawal already under way.

The move had not been unexpected by Battalion Headquarters. The telephone wire had remained intact until 9 a.m. when Captain **McElroy**,⁴ second-in-command of C Company, had informed headquarters that the unit was completely surrounded. Macky had then warned his quartermaster, Captain **Panckhurst**,⁵ that he must prepare for a withdrawal.

There was little hope of any improvement in the situation. The infantry who had enveloped C Company were almost certain to come down the ridge from **Pandeleimon** or to follow the track

¹ **Capt C. T. Mason**, MC; born Pukerau, 9 Sep 1915; school-teacher; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.

² They were afterwards employed digging out the rubble from the railway tunnel and carrying in telegraph poles as pit props.

³ **Sgt F. A. Kibblewhite**; **Thames**; born **Oamaru**, 3 Dec 1905; school-teacher; wounded 16 Apr 1941; p.w. 21 Nov 1941.

⁴ **Lt-Col H. M. McElroy**, DSO and bar, ED; **Auckland**; born **Timaru**, 2 Dec 1910; public accountant; CO **21 Bn** Jun 1943–Jun 1944; four times wounded.

⁵ **Maj G. H. Panckhurst**; **Waianakarua**, North Otago; born **Westport**, 1 Nov 1906; accountant; twice wounded.

from there to the railway station. The stretch between Point 266 and the castle, long under fire from artillery and tanks, was now enveloped in smoke, and German infantry infiltrating through this screen had

already forced 12 Platoon to withdraw to the 11 Platoon area.

At last about 10 a.m. the tanks, supported by engineers to select a route, were pressing forward along the saddle track towards the crest of the ridge. 'Many of them shed their tracks on the boulders, or split their track assemblies, and finally the leading troops ran on to mines.' As every tank of the advancing troop became a casualty the path was soon blocked. When a detour was attempted two more stuck in soft ground and another was 'blown on a mine and completely burnt out.' In the thick scrub visibility was very restricted and hardly a trace was seen of the New Zealanders 'except of occasional infantrymen running back.'¹ Still they were making appreciable gains which, with the encirclement of the left flank, finally decided Lieutenant-Colonel Macky that he must order his battalion to withdraw otherwise it would be overwhelmed.

The decision came as a shock to **Anzac Corps** Headquarters. At 9.20 a.m. a message had been received saying that the battalion's left flank was seriously threatened. Twenty minutes later, and again thirty-five minutes after that, the message was more or less repeated. At 10.15 a.m. the last message to be received had ended: 'W/T Sta 21 NZ Bn closing down. Getting out.'

The order of withdrawal was A Company, then two platoons of D Company and finally, when the last of B Company was coming out, the hitherto missing platoons of C Company appeared from the upper slopes. They fell back through 18 Platoon D Company (Lieutenant **Flavell**²), which in its turn got clear with the loss of only one man taken prisoner. The troop from 5 Field Regiment, after searching for a medium battery alongside the beach, had already left for the mouth of the **Pinios Gorge**; so with the carriers detailed to cover them, the companies began to make their way back to the bridge across the Pinios River.

To their infinite relief this stage of the withdrawal was quite undisturbed. The enemy's tanks had reached the crest of the ridge, his engineers had begun to clear away the mines and the more romantic had hastened to hoist the Nazi flag from the castle tower. But the blown

tunnel and the wretched surface of the track, which made it necessary for the tracked vehicles to be towed over, prevented any immediate exploitation of the situation. It was not until

¹ Report by *3 Panzer Regiment*.

² Maj N. R. Flavell; Dunedin; born Auckland, 17 Jan 1915; school-teacher; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped; reported safe 30 Nov 1941.

the following afternoon, 17 April, that the tanks were rattling along the railway track towards the Pinios River.

To the German High Command this pause of over twenty-four hours must have been decidedly irritating. *Battle Group 1* to the north of Mount Olympus had not been able to force 5 Brigade ¹ from Olympus Pass; *XXXX Corps* had found it 'impossible to build a bridge north of Servia ² because of enemy interference'; and the forces advancing through Grevena towards Kalabaka and Larisa required yet more time. The investment which was most likely to give the best and quickest return was therefore an advance from the Platamon ridge through the Pinios Gorge towards Larisa, the crossroads along the line of withdrawal. Consequently on 16 April, after 21 Battalion had withdrawn, *XVIII Corps* was signalling *2 Panzer Division*: 'Please push on with all possible speed to Elason and Larissa. Very important to reach Larissa.' ³

By then 21 Battalion had formed another line. The first choice, a narrow gap between the hills and the sea about a mile south of Platamon railway station, was not reassuring. The battalion had consequently marched about six miles through olive groves and across sandy flats to the ferry across the Pinios River, at the seaward end of the Pinios Gorge about four miles from the coast. Here Lieutenant-Colonel Macky and Brigadier Clowes, ⁴ who had been sent up by General Blamey to take what action he considered necessary, discussed whether the gorge should be defended at the seaward end, in the middle or on the edge of

the plain about five miles inland. The defence of the seaward entrance was possible, but as it would have been comparatively simple for the German mountain troops to cross the ridges and encircle the pass, they finally decided that 21 Battalion should withdraw to hold the western entrance.

Brigadier Clowes' instructions to Lieutenant-Colonel Macky were that it was 'essential to deny the gorge to the enemy till 19th April even if it meant extinction.' Support would arrive within twenty-four hours. When all the battalion had crossed, the ferry boat was to be sunk. Special attention had to be paid to the country on the north side of the river through which he expected the enemy to develop an outflanking movement and, if the Germans did force their way through the gorge, the battalion would withdraw to the road and railway crossing some seven miles south of the western exit.

¹ See pp. 254–69.

² See p. 273.

³ *2 Panzer Division* war diary, 10–21 April 1941.

⁴ CCRA, *Anzac Corps*.

The guns were then uncoupled, manhandled down the steep slope and taken across in the ferry to the south bank, along which they were hauled by trucks which had been brought up from B Echelon. The heavy gun tractors, ammunition limbers and Bren carriers went back along the track, through the tunnel and over the railway bridge at **Tempe**, some five miles up-stream. As this took time it was not until late afternoon that all were across and the ferry could be sunk—but not before the unit pioneers had in a most gentlemanly way ferried across 'a large flock of sheep and goats and then two shepherdesses.' The first tunnel and the rail track were blown by the engineers and the weary battalion was then

free to prepare its new positions.

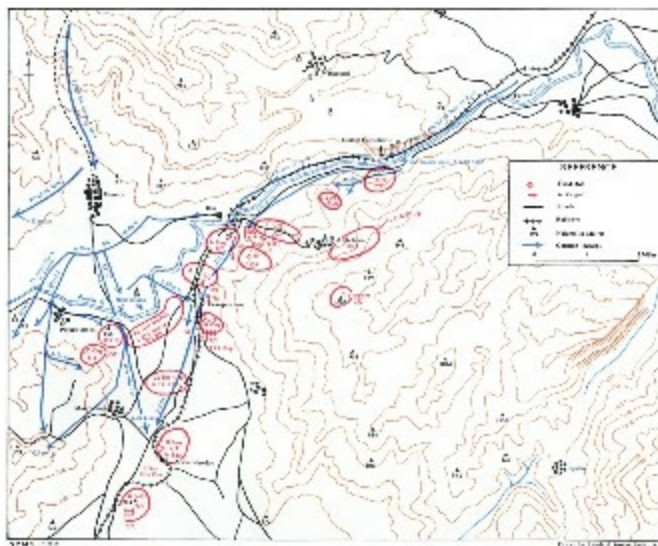
TO GREECE

THE TRANSFER OF 16 AUSTRALIAN BRIGADE TO PINIOS GORGE

The Transfer of 16 Australian Brigade to Pinios Gorge

By this time the disturbing reports which had been sent back that morning by 21 Battalion had convinced General Blamey that reinforcements must be sent to the **Pinios Gorge**. As 17 Brigade had been absorbed by **Savige Force** at **Kalabaka** and by **Lee Force** at **Dhomokos**, his only available reserve was 16 Brigade, which had marched the 35 miles from **Veroia** to **Servia** and then gone into position in the mountains to the east of the pass. The 2/1 Battalion on the right flank was in a world of snow and precipices about 5000 feet above sea level; 2/2 Battalion was south-east of **Moskhokhori**; and 2/3 Battalion was in reserve to the south of that village. On 15 April they were, like 6 New Zealand Brigade, ¹ to have come down from the mountains, but the difficulty of getting messages through to them and the absence of any roads other than bridle tracks had postponed their withdrawal until the morning of 16 April when 2/2 Battalion, the first ² out, had reached the highway south of **Servia Pass** about 10 a.m.

Here they had embussed and were about to move to the **Zarkos area** ³ when a liaison officer appeared with orders for Lieutenant- Colonel **Chilton** to report to Headquarters **Anzac Corps**. There he was told that the last signal from 21 Battalion had been most alarming and that **Brigadier Clowes**, who had been sent to find out what had happened to the battalion, had not yet returned. **Chilton** had therefore to hold the western entrance to the **Pinios Gorge** for 'possibly three or four days.' ⁴ To support his battalion there would be a battery of field artillery, a troop of three anti-tank guns and the carriers from two battalions.



The Pinios Gorge Action, 17–18 April 1941

¹ See p. 227.

² 22/3 Battalion reached the highway at midnight 16–17 April; 2/1 Battalion struggled out along the Fteri- Livadhion track to Olympus Pass and came under the control of 6 Australian Division.

³ See p. 228.

⁴ Long, p. 97.

Chilton then hastened southwards. Outside Larisa he met Brigadier Clowes, who told him that 21 Battalion had already withdrawn into the gorge, and at Tempe he found Lieutenant- Colonel Macky, who described the positions now occupied by his battalion. As it was then dark they arranged to meet early next morning to discuss the deployment of their forces.

Before then General Blamey, still worried about the situation, had decided to strengthen the force still further and to place it under the command of Brigadier Allen. So when that officer reported to Headquarters Anzac Corps at 2 a.m. that night, 17 April, he learnt that

he was to command a brigade group, the final strength of which would be 2/2 and 2/3 Australian Battalions, 21 New Zealand Battalion, 26 Battery 4 New Zealand Field Regiment, L Troop 7 New Zealand Anti-Tank Regiment, three guns of 1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, four carriers from 2/11 Australian Battalion and seven from 2/1 Australian Battalion. His instructions, given 'with the aid of a map and a torch', ¹ were to prevent the Germans entering **Larisa** from the east. As his first move he met 2/3 Battalion, still coming down from the mountains, and sent it on to the Pinios area. The 2/1 Battalion which was still withdrawing along the Fteri- **Livadhion** track became divisional reserve.

¹ Report on operations in **Greece**, 16 Australian Infantry Brigade.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 12 – THE DEFENCE OF THE PASSES, 14-17 APRIL

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TO GREECE

THE POSITIONS OF 5 BRIGADE ABOUT OLYMPUS PASS

The Positions of 5 Brigade about Olympus Pass

IN the weeks preceding the invasion of Greece the attention of the Division had been concentrated on the defences north of Katerini. The preparation of positions in the passes on either side of Mount Olympus had therefore been postponed until the arrival of 5 Brigade. On 6 April 28 (Maori) Battalion had gone to the west of Olympus Pass; 23 Battalion had gone to the east of it; and D Company 26 Battalion on the track above Platamon tunnel had come under command, pending relief by a company from the brigade.

The importance of these positions had then increased with the changing fortunes of the Allies. On 7 April, when the defeat of Yugoslavia seemed certain, the Higher Command decided that the Division must withdraw to defend the passes and, as every hour was important, tentative plans were made for its withdrawal. Fourth Brigade, with 6 Field Regiment in support, would return to a delaying position at the foot of the pass, while 6 Brigade with 4 and 5 Field Regiments would remain in position until contact with the enemy was made and then withdraw through 4 Brigade over Olympus Pass. Thereafter its defence would be the responsibility of 5 and 6 Brigades. As 21 Battalion had not yet been released from Athens the units would be regrouped: 5 Brigade would have 26 Battalion above the Platamon tunnel and 22 and 23 Battalions east of Olympus Pass; 6 Brigade would have 24, 25 and 28 (Maori) Battalions to the west of the pass.

The first steps were taken during the morning of 8 April: 22 Battalion ¹ was released from service with 6 Brigade and sent to a position in the Sanatorium area east of the pass; 26 Battalion (less D Company) was recalled to prepare positions for 6 Brigade to the west of 28 (Maori) Battalion.

At 11 a.m., however, the overall plan had been changed; General Wilson had decided that **W Force** must prepare to withdraw to the **Olympus- Aliakmon River** line. Fourth New Zealand Brigade would be sent to **Servia Pass** 'to form the pivot' on which the
with-

¹ Major Hart and the 200 men at **Kokkinoplos** were brought on the afternoon of 9 April.

drawals

from the north would be based. Sixth Brigade must prepare to move to **Olympus Pass** but it would not, as yet, take over any section of the front; it would either become a reserve for 5 Brigade or be sent to conduct operations in another sector.

That night, 8–9 April, a report was received at Divisional Headquarters that the Germans were expected in **Salonika**. Twenty-second Battalion was therefore moved to positions astride the road at the entrance to the pass and next day 26 Battalion was given other duties. ¹ One detachment was sent to control the never-ending stream of lorries and gun-limbers, Greek refugees and New Zealand soldiers; another was transported to the crest of the pass where a steep but usable track to the west had to be constructed for the guns of B and C Troops of 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment. That night the rest of 6 Brigade withdrew behind 5 Brigade and there it was joined on 10 April by 26 Battalion.

The situation was still too indefinite for the brigade to be other than divisional reserve, but the swiftly crumbling front and the decision to withdraw **W Force** beyond **Thermopylae** soon forced several adjustments. The **Olympus- Aliakmon River** line was now to serve only as a covering position for further withdrawals. On 13 April 26 Battalion ² was sent to the west of **Servia Pass**; on 14 April 24 Battalion moved to the west of **Olympus Pass**; and then on 15 April 24 and 25 Battalions ³ were

hurriedly transferred to prepare rearguard positions south of **Elasson**. Thus the defence of **Olympus Pass** was in the end the responsibility of 5 Brigade: 22, 23 and 28 (Maori) Battalions.

They had already done much to perfect their defences. In spite of the wind, rain and snow they had been wiring, digging and roadmaking, growing still fitter and becoming more and more conscious of the impending engagement. On 9 April those on the higher slopes saw the smoke of fires in **Salonika** some 40 miles away across the gulf. Refugees were now streaming through the pass; 4 and 6 Brigades with the attached regiments of artillery were steadily withdrawing, 'an incessant roar of traffic reverberating through the lines of 5 Brigade.'

On the right flank 23 Battalion, on the lower slopes of Mount **Olympus**, had been able, after the allotment of the highway sector to 22 Battalion, to extend its right flank high up the mountainside. D Company (Captain **Manson**⁴) was well up the ridge above

¹ General Blamey had already suggested that 21 Battalion be sent up from **Athens**, so 26 Battalion was no longer required at the **Platamon** tunnel.

² See p. 239.

³ See pp. 237– 8.

⁴ Maj I. O. Manson; Invercargill; born Otautau, 9 Jul 1905; clerk; 2 i/c 20 Bn Apr–Jul 1942; CO 20 Bn 5–21 Jul 1942.



5 BRIGADE HOLDS THE OLYMPUS PASS, 14-17 APRIL 1941

Yabadi; C Company (Major **Thomason**¹) was in and above **Lokova**; A Company (Captain **Kelly**²) extended the line above the Sanatorium. The carrier platoon was on anti-parachute duties about **Katerini**.

The position was naturally strong but it had one great weakness. The demolitions which would be blown above the junction of the main highway and the 'Back Road' would prevent any withdrawal of the battalion through **Olympus Pass**. Its safety was therefore dependent upon the completion of the road southwards across the lower slopes of **Mount Olympus** to **Kokkinoplos**. The work had been classed as urgent and much had been done. The battalion intelligence section (Lieutenant **Bassett**³) had studied the route and the pioneer platoon (Second-Lieutenant **Ensor**⁴), assisted during 6-9 April by the 200 men from 22 Battalion, had made it possible for trucks to go along the ridge behind each company of 23 Battalion. On the **Kokkinoplos** side 7 Field Company had been working along the mountainside since 7 April. Two hundred Greeks had been employed and 25 Battalion had given two days' work before going to **Elasson**. But the wet weather and the steep rock faces below the crest of the pass were now holding up the work, and although the engineers had by 14 April completed some five miles of the track they would still have taken three weeks to complete the last two miles over the pass.

Barbed wire, rations and ammunition for ten days had come up on 9

April; the B Echelon transport had been withdrawn over the pass to the **Pithion** area and the battalion posts were well established, the men working all through the moonlight of 11–12 April to complete them. Rain and snow had then retarded the work but by 14 April, when the Bren carriers withdrew from the plain and the demolitions had been blown along the highway, the companies were confident that they could hold the Germans.

The central sector of the brigade front covering the entrance to the pass was held by 22 Battalion. A Company (Captain **Hanton**⁵) adjoining 23 Battalion was on the ridge overlooking the Sanatorium; ⁶ C Company (Major I. A. Hart) followed the ridge through the

¹ **Maj H. H. Thomason**, MM, ED; **Motueka**; born Ngatimoti, **Nelson**, 9 Oct 1896; estate manager and orchardist; Wgtn Regt 1914–19 (2 Lt); coy comd **23 Bn**; wounded 29 May 1941.

² **Lt-Col S. J. Kelly**, ED; **Invercargill**; born Winton, 7 Feb 1895; school-teacher; coy comd **23 Bn** 1940–41; OC NZ Reception Depot, **Maadi**, Oct 1941–Apr 1942; CO 1 NMWC Regt (in NZ) 1942–43.

³ **Maj B. I. Bassett**, m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM 10 Bde May 1941; BM **4 Bde** Aug 1941–Jan 1942, Jun–Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

⁴ **Capt J. H. Ensor**, m.i.d.; **Cheviot**; born NZ 29 Jan 1908; farm manager.

⁵ **Maj S. Hanton**, ED; **Wanganui**; born Forfar, **Scotland**, 6 Aug 1908; printer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁶ On 10 April the staff, mostly Germans, disappeared. Next day HQ 5 Brigade arranged for the patients to be evacuated by the Divisional Ammunition Company.

forest to the Elikon stream; B Company (Captain **Laws**¹), on the ridge beyond, looked north-east towards **Katerini** down the wide road through the scrub-covered foothills and across the small bridges amidst the successive groves of plane trees; to the north again, on the shoulder round which the secondary road curved west to **Skotina**, was D Company (Major **Campbell**²). Back up the pass there was a blunt spur through which the road had been cut; it ended as a rocky hillock crested with some stone ruins. Here on **Ruin Hill** or Gibraltar were the battalion mortars and back up the road the unit Bren carriers.

The battalion sector was roughly four miles in breadth. Lateral communications were therefore important, but after 14 April, when the demolitions on the main highway were blown, it was impossible to use the road that branched off to the Sanatorium and to the lines of 23 Battalion. A track had therefore been cut from the main highway through the forest and across the gorge of the Elikon stream to give A and B Companies some connection with the highway and the right flank of D Company.

On the left flank 28 (Maori) Battalion had been digging two- men pits and preparing barbed-wire entanglements, but for a long time there had been no certainty as to its final position. Adjustments were made on several occasions; in fact B Company prepared three different positions, D Company had two days to prepare its final position and C Company had only one. As a result the battalion was now strung out across four miles of country, of which only two had any prepared defence system.

A Company (Captain **Bell**³) was on the right flank beside D Company 22 Battalion. Observation down the road and across country was good, but the immediate front was thick with dense scrub and the more distant approaches divided by several steep-banked streams, all of advantage to infiltrating infantry.

Beyond it facing north-west across the Mavroneri stream were two platoons of B Company (Captain **Royal**⁴); west again was D Company (Major **Dyer**⁵) above the stream and along a front of some 700 yards.

Finally, on the extreme left flank was 11 Platoon

¹ **Maj E. F. Laws, ED; Wanganui; born Napier, 9 May 1904; accountant.**

² **Brig T. C. Campbell, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Colombo, 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO 22 Bn Sep 1942–Apr 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Jan–Dec 1945; Commander of Army Schools, 1951–53; Commander, Fiji Military Forces, 1953–56; Commander, Northern Military District, 1958–.**

³ **Capt L. J. Bell; born Skippers, 27 Jun 1905; grocer's assistant; killed in action 22 May 1941.**

⁴ **Maj R. Royal, MC and bar; Wellington; born Levin, 23 Aug 1897; civil servant; served in Maori Pioneer Bn in First World War; coy comd 28 (Maori) Bn 1940–41; wounded 14 Dec 1941; 2 i/c 2 Maori Bn (in NZ) 1942–43; CO 2 Maori Bn May–Jun 1943.**

⁵ **Lt-Col H. G. Dyer, m.i.d.; Onerahi, Whangarei; born Hamilton, 7 Mar 1896; schoolteacher; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1941–May 1942; comd 9 Inf Bde 1943.**

B Company (Second-Lieutenant **Pene¹), almost two miles away² from the battalion and covering the Mavroneri crossing between the ridge and **Skotina** village. It had to prevent any encirclement of the brigade front by the track which ran up the mountains from **Skotina** to join the main highway well up in the pass.**

In support of 5 Brigade there were at first 32 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 4 Company 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion and 4 and 5 Field Regiments. The anti-tank guns were not well forward covering the approaches to the infantry, but were more to the rear in counterpenetration positions according to theories developed 'after the French and Belgian campaigns.' Six were on the right of the main highway and three along the highway itself in front of and behind the

Gibraltar position of 22 Battalion. The machine-gunners were dispersed, 10 Platoon with 23 Battalion behind [Lokova](#), 12 Platoon behind C Company 22 Battalion to cover the front between the Sanatorium and the road demolitions, and 11 Platoon at the junction of A and B Companies 28 (Maori) Battalion to cover the approach to the pass and the features opposite B and D Companies.

Fourth and 5th Field Regiments had withdrawn from the plain on 10 April and had been grouped under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson of 4 Field Regiment. The former, after much hard work on the steep tracks, was in position near the crest of the pass, with A and B Troops 25 Battery on the eastern side of the highway and C Troop up a precipitous muddy track on the western side. Twenty-sixth Battery was to have gone into position near [Ay Dhimitrios](#) on a steep ridge nearly 900 feet above the pass, but after the guns and water cart for D Troop had been winched up and all ammunition carried up by hand, positions for E and F Troops were found near 25 Battery.

On the night of 14–15 April after all this labour the regiment was suddenly withdrawn. At dusk 25 Battery ³ was despatched to [Kalabaka](#) to come under the command of 17 Australian Brigade. Twenty-sixth Battery and Regimental Headquarters pulled out later, at 1 a.m. 15 April, staging just south of Kato Filippaioi throughout daylight and joining 6 Brigade after dusk in the rearguard position that was being prepared south of [Elasson](#).

This left 5 Field Regiment in support of 5 Brigade. B and C Troops 27 Battery ⁴ were west of the top of the pass, some 5000 yards from the front line on a ridge up which the infantry had

¹ [Capt R. Pene](#); [Rotorua](#); born [Whakatane](#), 1 Feb 1912; foreman, Maori Affairs Dept.

² After the Germans attacked, 2 Lt G. A. Te Kuru, second-in-command D Company, was detached with twenty men along the ridge towards [Skotina](#) as a link between D Company and 11

³ See pp. 222 and 225.

⁴ A Troop 27 Battery was with 21 Battalion in the **Platamon** tunnel area.

used picks and shovels to build a negotiable road. 'Even in wet weather which made the clay surface soft and slippery, this road proved adequate and little winching of the guns into position was required.' F Troop 28 Battery was nearer the entrance to the pass; D Troop and E Troop, after its withdrawal on 14 April from the **Aliakmon River** with the **Divisional Cavalry**, were farther back behind 27 Battery.

After 4 Field Regiment had gone there was some discussion as to whether the gun positions should be changed, but a reconnaissance showed that the left flank hitherto covered by 4 Field Regiment was too rough for any large-scale attack by armoured units. In any case, on the morning of 15 April Brigadier Hargest advised Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser that as there would be a general withdrawal that night no changes need be made by his regiment.

The ammunition dumps left in the 4 Field Regiment area were moved, however, by parties from 5 Field Regiment to the end of the straight stretch of highway south of **Elasson**. They had been expected to make only one trip, but through a misunderstanding which later proved fortunate the men slaved all night, some groups in spite of the wretched, crowded roads making two or three trips and clearing all the ammunition. 'The whole of this ammunition was subsequently fired by 2/3 Australian Regt., in defence of the **Elasson** position. Without it, it is doubtful if the enemy could have been held off, as he was, until withdrawal was affected at the stipulated time.' ¹

¹ Report on operations, HQ NZ Divisional Artillery.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS APPROACH OLYMPUS PASS, NIGHT 14-15 APRIL

The Germans approach Olympus Pass, Night 14-15 April

After such preparations and with such natural advantages the battalions all hoped that the **Olympus Pass** would be the scene of their first engagement. They were standing-to at dawn and dusk; the carrier platoons of 23 and 28 (Maori) Battalions were patrolling the landing ground at **Kalokhori**; and the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment along the **Aliakmon River** had been in action since the night of 12–13 April. ²

The withdrawal from the river was complete by the evening of 14 April when the carrier platoons and the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment came back into the pass. The bridges along the eastern approach were blown; the carriers of 22 Battalion came in past the road block and the last demolitions, including that of the bridge in front of 11 Platoon 22 Battalion, were blown at 6 p.m.

Before then enemy reconnaissance aircraft had been flying over the entrance to the pass 'without hindrance other than ineffective fire from AA LMGs', and the forward elements of **2 Panzer Division** had reached **Katerini**. But it was not until 11 p.m. that some motorcyclists from **I/38 Anti-Tank Unit** raced confidently up the highway, approached the first demolition and were efficiently shot up by 11 Platoon (Lieutenant **Armstrong** ¹). Next morning there were five wrecked motor-cycles, some with side-cars, lying along the road. Otherwise the night was quiet, though German transport with headlights full on could be heard moving out from **Katerini**. **Battle Group 2** was moving down the coast towards the **Platamon** tunnel ² and 21 Battalion; **Battle Group 1** had orders to cross by the **Olympus** Pass to **Elasson** and **Larisa**.

Within the New Zealand Division there was a sudden decision for an earlier withdrawal. ³ That night, 14–15 April, Brigadier Hargest was recalled by **General Freyberg** to a conference at Headquarters 6 Brigade

and informed that 5 Brigade would, the following night, withdraw to the head of the pass and hold it for twenty-four hours to cover the withdrawal of the brigades from **Servia Pass**. The general atmosphere was one of surprise and disappointment, but the orders were issued next day and the battalions made their preparations. Reserve rations were distributed, stores and ammunition were sorted out and 23 Battalion sent 8 Platoon back to prepare a line above **Kokkinoplos**. Then, to the relief and pleasure of the battalions, Brigadier Hargest was ordered to delay the withdrawal for another twenty-four hours, until the night of 16–17 April.

In any case, 15 April had not been the day for serious attacks about **Olympus Pass**. *Battle Group 2* of the enemy had attacked 21 Battalion above the **Platamon** tunnel but *Battle Group 1*, having a more formidable task, took longer to assemble and 5 Brigade had a relatively quiet day. The mortar section with D Company 23 Battalion opened up on a patrol that was probing about the right flank; in the pass itself 22 Battalion considered that it had a quiet day, apart from some slight activity in the morning. This is somewhat surprising for the Germans sent forward a fighting patrol from *2/304 Infantry Regiment* with supporting mortars, machine guns and anti-tank guns to enter the pass, discover positions and take prisoners. Apparently it did not get far enough forward to worry 22 Battalion. A Company 28 (Maori) Battalion, on the north side of the pass, saw the vehicles coming up the road from **Katerini** and with the support of 12 Platoon 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion forced the infantry to debus. Five were wounded, and when 5 Field Regiment shelled the road the patrol withdrew. The *2/304 Infantry Regiment*, however, continued to reconnoitre, but no serious attempt was made that day to approach the pass. The Germans preferred to bring up their artillery and, in the late afternoon, to shell the brigade front. They were probably searching for the guns of 5 Field Regiment, whose positions were well camouflaged and too far back to justify any useless counter-fire.

Darkness brought no direct attacks but the Germans were obviously

patrolling, particularly across the front of D Company 22 Battalion. They were also, it is now known, replacing *2/304 Infantry Regiment* with *I/2 Infantry Regiment* and preparing to attack up the highway towards the pass. At the same time a patrol from *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment* by coming in to the south of the Sanatorium would attempt an indirect approach to the head of the pass.

² See pp. 235– 7.

¹ Maj C. N. Armstrong, MC and bar, ED; **Wanganui**; born **Wanganui**, 12 Sep 1910; barrister and solicitor; p.w. 23 Nov 1941; escaped **Poland**, Oct 1943; 2 i/c **22 Bn** Nov 1944–Jun 1945.

² See pp. 244– 8.

³ There is nothing in **Anzac Corps** or **New Zealand Division** operation orders to explain why **5 Brigade** was to withdraw on the night 15–16 April instead of the night 16–17 April. Brigadier Hargest in each case acted on verbal instructions from **General Freyberg**.

TO GREECE

THE MAIN ATTACK, 16 APRIL

The Main Attack, 16 April

At first light on 16 April A Company of the **Maori Battalion** reported that the road from **Katerini** was black with vehicles. To the observers of 5 Field Regiment it was a reconnaissance in force but actually it was the main attack by *Battle Group 1*,¹ with 2 and 3 *Companies I/2 Infantry Regiment* east and west of the road to clean out machine-gun posts and screen the main body advancing straight down the highway. The flanking companies moved forward very slowly and afterwards complained of machine guns set in excellent positions and giving 'murderous fire'; apparently the observers for the German artillery had not been able to locate the New Zealanders in the thick scrub. As 5 Field Regiment was also shelling heavily and accurately, the Germans had 'fairly heavy casualties'² and were halted long before they reached the lines of 22 Battalion.

The main body moved up the road with *1 Company I/2 Infantry Regiment* in front and the motorised troops well forward to exploit the possible break-through. They were stopped by 'heavy A Tk, HMG, LMG and shellfire'; nine vehicles were severely damaged and another destroyed.

The tanks of *5 Company* and a platoon from *6 Company 3 Panzer Regiment* then pushed forward, but the blown bridge could not be bypassed and the engineers could not repair it because of the volume

¹ *2 Inf Regt, II/74 Arty Regt, II/3 Pz Regt, 3/38 A-Tk Unit, 1/38 Engr Bn, 8/800 Brandenburg Regt, 2/76 Lt AA Regt. Later III/74 Arty Regt (less one troop) and 3/70 Engr Bn were added.*

² *2 Infantry Regiment diary.*

of hostile fire. The companies attempted to silence the New Zealanders, but the fire from 5 Field Regiment was so heavy and so accurate that they had to withdraw, leaving one tank stuck in the stream bed. *No. 1 Company I/2 Infantry Regiment* fared no better when it was sent forward to clear out the machine-gun posts across the hillside. The platoon to the west of the road and the one which crossed the bridge both made little progress, the line being 'heavily wired and mined' and the machine-gun fire too harassing. A battle group of infantry, anti-tank guns and tanks was therefore ordered to push through to the Sanatorium and attempt to silence them from that angle.

As seen by 22 Battalion, the Germans had first been halted by the fire from the unit mortar platoon (Lieutenant [McAra](#)¹) and the concentrated fire of every battery of 5 Field Regiment. They had then withdrawn to shelter but the tanks had soon returned, moving up and down searching for the battalion's forward platoons. The anti-tank guns being well back, the German armour was safe from all except concentrated shellfire; so when, about 8.40 a.m., the tanks advanced once again towards the bridge, they were not halted until E Troop sent over ten rounds and left one of them a wreck in the creek bed beside the demolished bridge. From there they pulled back. The rest of the day, for 22 Battalion, was relatively quiet, though the most forward troops were harassed by tank fire and forced to use alternative positions.

The Germans, at last convinced that the road could not be forced, were now developing encircling movements through the scrub and forest on either flank. With 23 and 28 (Maori) Battalions both holding very wide fronts, this was difficult to check; the scrub was too dense and visibility too limited now that a heavy mist was enveloping the ridges and isolating the already widely separated posts.

On the right flank the pressure was greatest about [Lokova](#) village in front of C Company 23 Battalion. A section post of 13 Platoon was overrun and its members captured, but the Germans were driven back and the position reoccupied. Farther north there was some probing into

the lines of B Company, but as the afternoon wore on the most serious attack seemed to be developing in the extreme east high up along the ridge in the direction of **Ravani** village. Once when there was a break in the swirling mist 16 Platoon (Lieutenant **Bond** ²) was able to check the infiltrating enemy, but there were always signs of Germans moving up as if

¹ **Lt E. J. McAra**; born Dunedin, 5 Apr 1906; commercial artist; killed in action 20 May 1941.

² **Capt R. L. Bond**; **Adelaide**; born Aust., 19 Feb 1908; brewer; **23 Bn** 1940–41; enlisted AIF 1942.

they were attempting to get between 23 Battalion and **Kokkinoplos**.

At last D Company called up support for 17 Platoon (Lieutenant **Connolly** ¹) on the extreme right flank. As the battalion had no reserve, Major **Leckie** ² took members of the transport platoon, the quartermaster and his staff and several signallers and combed the scrub-covered slope in search of the patrol. They found no Germans, but later in the afternoon another report stated that the enemy had been seen climbing on the slopes of **Mount Olympus**, a threat which would have cut the line of retreat to **Kokkinoplos**. Some of the signallers and quartermaster's staff were immediately despatched to cover odd tracks coming in towards the line of withdrawal and the only carrier ³ still available was sent up with Major **Fyfe** ⁴ and two Bren-gunners. The withdrawal route was thus covered. D Company was still threatened by the probing enemy but any serious movement could be halted by the concentrated fire of 5 Field Regiment.

This activity on the right flank was due to variations in the German plan of attack. Once it was clear that *Battle Group 1* could not force its way into the pass the advanced guard ⁵ of *72 Infantry Division* had been given two tasks: to advance through **Kokkinoplos** towards **Elasson** and to make an encircling movement through **Koundouriotissa** towards **Ay**

Dhimitrios, the village at the crest of the pass. As a preliminary move ⁹ and *11 Cycle Companies* had approached **Ravani**. At 6 p.m. *3 Motor Engineer Company* and *12 Machine Gun Company* came up, a frontal attack was ordered and at dusk the New Zealanders withdrew from their 'well sited and fortified hill positions.' ⁶ Two companies then attempted to get through to **Ay Dhimitrios** while *3 Engineer Company* and *12 Machine Gun Company* followed *23 Battalion* as it withdrew ⁷ across the rough pass leading to **Kokkinoplos**.

On the left flank the experience of *28 (Maori) Battalion* was similar to that of *23 Battalion*, the morning being relatively quiet with mist and rain cloaking the movements of the enemy. Once the clouds lifted, about 3 p.m., the Germans who could be seen

¹ **Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly**, m.i.d.; **Ashburton**; born NZ 13 Aug 1910; petrol serviceman; CO **23 Bn** Apr–May 1943, Dec 1943–May 1944; twice wounded.

² **Col D. F. Leckie**, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Invercargill**; born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1897; schoolteacher; Canterbury Mounted Rifles Regt, **Anzac Mounted Division**, 1916–19; CO **23 Bn** Aug 1940–Mar 1941, May 1941–Jun 1942; comd 75 Sub-Area, **Middle East**, Aug 1942–Mar 1944; wounded 25 May 1941.

³ The others were already to the rear making an unsuccessful attempt to cross the uncompleted track to **Kokkinoplos**.

⁴ **Maj T. Fyfe**, ED; born Pakanui, 3 Oct 1892; school-teacher; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁵ *III (Cycle)/124 Inf Regt* less *1 Company*, plus a platoon of light infantry guns; the reinforced *72 Cycle Squadron* plus a platoon of anti-tank guns; *2/72 A-Tk Unit* plus a platoon of 50-mm anti-tank guns; *3/72 Mot Engr Bn*, *5/59 AA Unit*, wireless troop of *72 Sigs Unit*.

⁶ Report on action by 72 *Division* advanced guard at **Olympus**, 16–17 April.

⁷ See pp. 266– 7.

approaching A Company were engaged with all available arms. The machine-gunners, whose longer range would have been useful, had already been ordered back in preparation for the withdrawal, but the fire from rifles, Bren guns and the 25-pounders of 5 Field Regiment was sufficient. The enemy seemed to move westwards along the front to cross the Mavroneri stream and attempt, unsuccessfully, to approach B Company's lines.

The Germans then appeared to edge still farther westwards seeking for a gap in the sector held by D Company. To prevent that unit being outflanked, 11 Platoon B Company (Second-Lieutenant Pene) had been placed beyond it opposite the village of **Skotina**, but with the successive westward moves of the enemy Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer strengthened the flank with 13 Platoon C Company (Second-Lieutenant **Reedy** ¹). The enemy's approach was carefully observed by three scouts who were sent out as soon as the Germans appeared in front of D Company. One of them, Corporal **Tainui**, ² dealt with three Germans and reported that a large number were collecting in the gorge.

In the fading light they scrambled out below 16 Platoon D Company and close to the junction with B Company to deliver the most determined attack in the fighting about **Olympus Pass**—‘the silent forest had gone berserk with sounds of mortars, rifles, grenades’ Firing sub-machine guns and tossing over grenades, they pressed through the wire, killing three men in the forward section of 16 Platoon. The others were able to withdraw under the covering fire of the section leader, Corporal Taituha, ³ who remained behind, badly wounded. The men were then steadied by Corporal **Harrison** ⁴ of the reserve platoon, the firing died down and when 18 Platoon (Lieutenant Gilroy ⁵) came over to clear the

area there were no Germans to be seen.

Three companies of *II/2 Infantry Regiment* had been sent up to relieve *I Battalion* and to capture Point 917 by this encircling movement from the west. They had reached the stream bed north-west of the steep slopes of Point 917, but *8 Company* to the east had been pinned down by machine-gun and mortar fire; *7* and *9 Companies* had rushed across the Mavroneri stream, coming under heavy fire and losing three officers wounded, including the commander and adjutant. *No. 7 Company* and then *8 Company*, When it was clear, both failed to make any impression. 'The knocking out of several enemy MGs in the thrust through the first belt of wire had also

¹ **Capt H. Te O. Reedy**; born Whareponga, 16 Aug 1903; sheep-farmer; p.w. May 1941.

² **Sgt J. Tainui**, MM; born NZ 13 Oct 1917; labourer; killed in action 15 Dec 1941.

³ **Cpl H. P. Taituha**; born NZ 4 Jan 1907; Native Land Dept; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

⁴ **Sgt G. R. Harrison**, m.i.d.; born Opunake, 23 Jul 1907; auditor; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

⁵ **Lt J. T. Gilory**; born NZ 8 Mar 19056; clerk.

failed to diminish the volume of fire.' ¹ The acting battalion commander had then used the gathering darkness to cover his withdrawal across the creek to the high ground opposite.

Fifth Brigade could therefore claim that it had repulsed attacks on all three fronts. And it has also recorded that the day's success was due in no small measure to the swift and effective support of 5 Field Regiment, which fired more than 3000 rounds and 'won the highest

praise of all ranks of the Infantry.’ In the German reports there are constant references to the New Zealand shelling of tanks and troops and many complaints about the absence of Stuka support and the difficulty of spotting the New Zealand artillery.

¹ *2 Infantry Regiment* battle report on **Olympus** action.

TO GREECE

5 BRIGADE BEGINS ITS WITHDRAWAL, NIGHT 16-17 APRIL

5 Brigade begins its Withdrawal, Night 16-17 April

Once night fell German activity faded away on all sectors of the front. Having realised that a direct assault was unlikely to succeed, they were waiting for the advanced guard of *72 Infantry Division* to complete its encircling move through the wild country to the south of the pass. Fifth Brigade was therefore able to complete the first stage of what was to be an unexpectedly smooth withdrawal.

On the right flank 23 Battalion had to climb across the range to **Kokkinoplos**. With the help of a Greek mule train the sick and the wounded had been taken over during the day. The mass of essential equipment had been taken in the 15-cwt trucks to the end of the Back Road but the Greeks, disturbed no doubt by the shellfire, refused to pack it over to **Kokkinoplos** so there it remained, the men having more than enough weight of weapons and equipment, as it was, to carry out over the rough mountain track.

Headquarters Company came out at dusk; B Company followed about 8 p.m., then A Company and Battalion Headquarters. They waited along the Back Road for C Company, which had some difficulty in disengaging and did not appear until 9 p.m. In case some German mountaineers had climbed round **Mount Olympus**, 11 Platoon B Company (Lieutenant **Begg**²) went out as a vanguard, the other companies following and being joined by D Company from the ridges on the right flank. The pioneer platoon brought up the rear, demolishing the Back Road in six places.

In the seven miles from there to **Kokkinoplos** the companies had to cross the Poros stream and climb over 2000 feet by a track that was sometimes knee-deep in mud, often precipitous and naturally very difficult to follow that pitch-black night. The way seemed

² **Capt T. F. Begg**; born NZ 17 Jul 1912; stock agent; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

interminable, packs and personal gear were often cast away but weapons and ammunition were all brought out. Eventually, about 6.30 a.m. on 17 April, A Company left a rearguard along the crest of the pass and the battalion stumbled down to the empty houses of the little village, where the men dried their clothes or fell asleep.

Elements of some supporting units had moved with the battalion. The observation post party from 5 Field Regiment had been able to join the unit transport on the **Olympus Pass** road, but 10 Platoon 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, with all its heavy Vickers machine guns and equipment, had struggled out with the battalion. The guns of 32 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment were a different proposition. The three on the pass road from E Troop could be withdrawn; the nine to the south of the highway with 23 Battalion could not be brought out. The CRE had thought that they could be manhandled over the Poros stream and over the col to **Kokkinoplos**, so Major **Oakes**, ¹ with a party from Regimental Headquarters, and Lieutenant **Neale**, ² of 15 Light Aid Detachment, with heavy tackle and wire ropes had come up to give assistance.

The F Troop guns were taken to the Poros stream but they could not be taken across. They were therefore stripped of their telescopes and rolled into the gorge. The three guns south of the road with 22 Battalion were dismantled where they stood, the two G Troop guns with 23 Battalion were wrecked, the crews under Second-Lieutenant **Moor** ³ attaching themselves to A Company 23 Battalion and serving as infantrymen.

The companies of 22 Battalion were astride the main highway, but even so their withdrawal was not simple. The precipitous ridges and the dense undergrowth, the muddy tracks and the pitch-black night made it so difficult to get clear that C Company, the nearest, took three hours to reach the highway. However, by 8.30 p.m. the files were trudging past

the check point, carrying practically all their arms, ammunition and equipment. Two miles back waited the motor transport which took them to **Ay Dhimitrios** by 4 a.m., 17 April. The only late arrivals, a party of forty men from D Company led by Captain T. C. Campbell, came out from the north side after climbing first west and then south, keeping direction by the sound of the 25-pounders and coming out on the highway below **Ay Dhimitrios**.

¹ **Lt-Col T. H. E. Oakes**, MC and bar, m.i.d.; born England, 24 Mar 1895; Royal Artillery (retd); CO 7 A-Tk Regt May–Nov 1941; killed in action 30 Nov 1941.

² **Lt J. W. Neale**; **Wellington**; born **New Plymouth**, 3 Aug 1909; salesman.

³ **Maj R. J. Moor**, ED; **Wellington**; born **Auckland**, 11 Mar 1920; clerk; wounded 26 Nov 1941; now **Regular Force**.

The demolitions to the rear were blown by the pioneer platoon (Lieutenant **Wadey** ¹) at 1 a.m.; B Company, after screening the approaches to **Ay Dhimitrios**, came through at dawn. The battalion, some men on foot and some on trucks, then moved back about three miles from the village and stood to in mist and rain waiting for the Germans to press forward.

On the left flank, to the north of the pass, 28 (Maori) Battalion had to withdraw across country not so high as that traversed by 23 Battalion but much more heavily timbered. The dusk attack on D Company had also taken some time to fade out, so it was not until 10.30 p.m. that the Maoris could begin their withdrawal along a mule track that ran from Battalion Headquarters to the main highway east of **Ay Dhimitrios**. The intelligence section had marked the track with white paper and cigarette packets and some heavy equipment had already gone out with the mule trains, but once the withdrawal began the Greeks and the mules were not to be found. The already weary Maoris had therefore to carry out

unnecessarily heavy packs.

The march out from Battalion Headquarters with B Company as rearguard has been described as a ‘terrible nightmare’ which made ‘perhaps, a more lasting impression on the minds of those who faced the ordeal than any subsequent experience of war. In single file and for hours and hours the men of the battalion trudged across these miles of rugged, mountainous countryside with their backs bent under the heavy loads that they were asked to carry.’² In places they had to feel their way through the scrub; at the halts there was always the fear of falling asleep and being left behind. So heavy was the going that Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer eventually ordered all packs to be dumped. Better time was then made and the greater part of the battalion reached the highway in the pass about 3.30 a.m., 17 April, just as the engineers were about to blow the demolitions. It had been a very close call, for at 3 a.m. Brigadier Hargest had reluctantly decided that if the Maoris did not appear within the next half hour their transport would be withdrawn and the road blown. They were now taken back into the pass to the temporary positions beyond **Ay Dhimitrios.**

Eighteen men were lost during this withdrawal. The detachment under Lieutenant Te Kuru³ from D Company, which had been posted as a link between the company and the platoon near **Skotina, did not get clear. No. 11 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Pene) and 13 Platoon C Company (Second-Lieutenant Reedy) lost eight men**

¹ **Capt M. G. Wadey; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 3 Apr 1913; foreman plumber; wounded and p.w. 23 May 1941.**

² **28 Battalion narrative, pp. 155–6.**

³ **2 Lt G. A. Te Kuru; born NZ 22 Sep 1908; civil servant; killed in action 21 May 1941.**

during their exhausting climb from the extreme left flank to

Battalion Headquarters and thence along the track to the pass.

Fifth Field Regiment had been withdrawing ever since the late afternoon, although a report that the enemy had broken into the lines of B Company 28 (Maori) Battalion sent F Troop 28 Battery hurrying back to cover the left flank from positions at the head of the pass. Twenty-seventh Battery withdrew about 8 p.m., the guns being roped down the wet clay tracks. D and E Troops 28 Battery came out last after twenty hours' continuous action and the whole regiment was in position south of [Ay Dhimitrios](#) by first light.

The demolitions to the rear of the brigade were the responsibility of 3 Section 7 Field Company (Lieutenant [Hector](#) ¹), which had returned from [Kokkinoplos](#) on 15 April to continue the work begun by 5 Field Park Company and 19 Army Troops Company. Hector had taken over three demolitions and set about the preparation of a fourth, two subsections working in shifts for twenty-four hours, blasting a hole 14 feet through solid rock and placing two cases of gelignite and half a ton of ammonal in position.

At 12.15 a.m., 17 April, the charge near the forward positions was fired, but instead of the road and retaining wall being cut away there was only a series of easily negotiable craters. The second and third demolitions had no better results. The fourth, the one prepared near the head of the pass by 3 Section 7 Field Company, was fired at 7 a.m. after the withdrawal of 28 Battalion. Once again the cliff face did not fall away but the crater was much deeper and a more effective obstacle. Even so, to the advancing Germans it was no great barrier—a most disappointing fact when it is remembered that the Division had had five weeks in the area to prepare for just such an event. As it is opinions still differ as to what would have been the best method of demolition. Charges along the outside of the road to supplement the inner charges might have sliced away the road. But that method needed additional charges, and explosives in [Greece](#) were not plentiful. Some delay might have been caused if the cliff face above the road had been blown down

on to the road itself. Whatever the reason, the important fact was that the Germans were free to make an unexpectedly swift crossing that nearly brought disaster to those withdrawing from **Servia Pass**.²

¹ **Lt J. R. M. Hector**, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 17 May 1913; civil engineer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

² See pp. 296– 7.

TO GREECE

THE POSITIONS OF 4 BRIGADE ABOUT SERVIA PASS

The Positions of 4 Brigade about Servia Pass

In the **Servia Pass** area there had been less time to prepare positions. On the night of 9–10 April 4 Brigade Group had moved over from **Mount Olympus** to the southern slopes of the pass and next morning, after some unpleasant hours in the mud, the units ¹ had moved into position. Eighteenth and 19th Battalions went to the steep escarpment which extends westwards from **Servia** to the **Aliakmon River** and 20 Battalion to reserve positions astride the road. After 12 April a company ² from 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion was under command, two platoons going with 19 Battalion and two platoons with 20 Battalion.

For the next few days the weather was severe, with heavy rain in the pass and snow on the higher levels, but the battalions managed to improve the defences. The Germans were moving south and there was a steady stream of pathetic refugees, detachments of Greek soldiers and, on 12 April, a Yugoslav battery ³ of 88-millimetre guns which was placed under the command of 6 Field Regiment in an anti-tank role.

The night, 12–13 April, was one of great activity about the pass. The battalions had been warned that the German columns then approaching **Kozani** could be expected to appear next morning. The carrier platoons on the river flats below the escarpment were called back through the pass, 18 Battalion transport was brought through to Lava and all units were warned of the possible descent of paratroopers. The 580th Army Troops Company, Royal Engineers, with its heavy equipment, was brought back from the bridge area to a position near 4 Brigade Headquarters, a demolition party ⁴ having been left to deal with the bridge. Finally, during the night of 13–14 April, different units of 6 Australian Division came through, the road south to **Elasson** having been kept clear for their withdrawal.

By this time the Australian brigades from the north were assembling on the flanks. On 13 April 16 Brigade completed its gruelling march through the hills from **Veroia** Pass; it was now establishing itself in the mountains to the east,⁵ no great distance from 5 New Zealand Brigade at **Mount Olympus**. The country to the west was occupied the same day by 2/4 and 2/8 Battalions of **19 Australian Brigade**, who as part of **Mackay Force** had held the **Klidhi Pass** and had then been brought back⁶ to **Kerasia**, a village from which they had marched south-west to their new positions.

¹ See pp. 184– 8.

² One other company was with **19 Australian Brigade**, another with **Savige Force** and another in Corps reserve.

³ The battery fired on enemy aircraft on 13–14 April, ran out of ammunition and withdrew south to an unknown destination on the afternoon of 14 April. A Greek battery, probably 75-mm, was also in the area but does not seem to have taken part in the action.

⁴ The main body of the company moved south on 13 April.

⁵ See p. 252.

⁶ See p. 238.

The expected appearance of the German advanced guard had not taken place. Away to the north beyond **Kozani** 1 Armoured Brigade had throughout the afternoon and early evening of 13 April been fighting¹ the advanced guard of *9 Panzer Division*, and now that darkness had fallen over **Proastion** the British units were withdrawing through **Kozani** to the **Grevena** area. The Germans, short of petrol and ammunition, were quite unable to continue their thrust towards **Servia**. Nor could their

supporting units come through from the north. Apparently three columns of traffic all hastening south had caused a gigantic traffic jam in the **Klidhi Pass**. The reserves did get through by the night 13–14 April, but the last of the Allied rearguard was then west through the **Siatista Pass** towards **Grevena** or south through **Kozani** and across the **Aliakmon River** to the lines of 4 Brigade.

In the **Servia Pass** area the 4 Brigade units had spent 13 April improving their defences and anxiously waiting for information about the delaying action then being fought by 1 Armoured Brigade at **Ptolemais**. The attacks from the air were now both heavy and frequent, with reconnaissance aircraft circling over the pass and directing a series of bomber and fighter attacks along the roads, the infantry localities and the gun positions. But the raids, though spectacular, were not remarkably destructive. The stretch through the pass from **Prosilion** towards **Servia** was given special attention but the casualty list was relatively light: three wounded (one fatally) in 19 Battalion and two killed, one wounded, in 20 Battalion.

Nor had the engineers been prevented from completing their demolitions. At 3.30 p.m. Australian units assisted by the detachment left by 580 British Army Troops Company had fired the demolitions on the **Aliakmon bridge**. The three spans had collapsed into the relatively shallow riverbed, leaving the bridge unusable by motor transport but serviceable for active infantrymen. The temporary bridge a short distance downstream was no problem, the pontoons being sunk and the superstructure left to float down the gorge. The demolitions in and south of the pass were the concern of Lieutenant Kelsall and his section from 6 Field Company. Ever since their arrival at **Piræus** they had treasured some naval depth-charges, each containing 360 pounds of TNT, and now at last they had them in position, some in the cutting on the **Servia** side of the pass, one just over the crest on the road westwards towards **Dheskati** and several on the highway itself as it twisted south towards **Elasson** and **Larisa**.

Next day, 14 April, the defenders, knowing that 1 Armoured

¹ See pp. 212– 14.

Brigade had turned ¹ westwards through the mountains towards **Grevena**, waited expectantly for the Germans to enter **Kozani** and move down the long incline towards the Aliakmon bridge. About midday convoys were seen entering the town, and during the afternoon there was a patrol moving over the demolished bridge and tanks appearing down the highway. The battery from 7 Medium Regiment was already in action when 6 Field Regiment, about 3 p.m., opened fire on the column of vehicles, the groups of tanks and files of infantry.

Overhead the *Luftwaffe*, doing its best to support the ground troops, was paying particular attention to the guns and any vehicles along the highway. The enemy's artillery came into action about 7 p.m., its airbursts ranging over the road junctions and its shellfire continuing throughout the night, the gunners searching for the Allied batteries and for any traffic on the roads.

As it happened, 20 Battalion was then moving up to new positions. C Company had been left in reserve but the others had been instructed to fill the gap above the cliffs between 19 Battalion and the **Aliakmon River**. The lorries were machine-gunned just before leaving and came under shellfire at the crossroads above the pass, but there were no casualties and by daylight the companies were along the ridge overlooking the river and the village of Rimnion, with A Company on the right adjoining 19 Battalion, B Company in the centre and D Company continuing westwards to the Aliakmon River. C Troop 31 Anti-Tank Battery was under command to cover the approaches east and west of Rimnion; two platoons of 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion were attached. And as the front was often beyond the range of the artillery on the 4 Brigade front, 7 Medium Regiment covered the approaches. The 2/3 Australian Field Regiment in the Mikrovalton area was to give support if necessary.

Finally that night, 14–15 April, on orders from Brigade Headquarters, the charges to complete the anti-tank ditches across the road in the 19 Battalion area were fired by the sub-section from 6 Field Company which had been standing by.

¹ See p. 214.

TO GREECE

ACTION IN SERVIA PASS, 15 APRIL

Action in Serbia Pass, 15 April

The enemy had also been very active. After the engagement at **Ptolemais** the leading units of **9 Panzer Division** had been organised into groups and the forward one ² led by Colonel Graf

² **11 Inf Regt** less **7 Coy**, two coys **59 MC Bn**, **HQ 102 Arty Unit** with part of the observation battery, **III/102 Arty Unit** less **7 Coy**, **III/102 Lt Arty Coln**, **HQ** and **2 Coy 86 AA Unit** less **1 pl**, **3/50 A-Tk Unit**, **1 pl 33 Pz Regt**, **HQ** and **1/86 Engr Unit**, **1 bty AA guns**, **2/60 MDS Sec.**

von Sponeck ¹ had entered **Kozani** about midday. **No. 8 Company 11 Infantry Regiment** had then been sent to take the **Aliakmon** bridge before it was demolished. The attempt was unsuccessful but the commander reported that there was little activity on the south side of the river. The shellfire was accurate but by 7.30 p.m. the company, supported by machine-gun and mortar sections, had clambered over the ruins of the bridge and was advancing warily along the few miles of straight road towards **Servia**.

No serious opposition was expected. The general situation indicated that the British were withdrawing and according to an air report 'there was not a single enemy soldier between the river and the heights S.W. of **Servia**.' ² The German High Command had therefore decided that a swift assault even by a small force would capture this important pass. So about 2 a.m. when **8 Company**, now supported by **6 Company**, was approaching **Servia**, orders were received for the force to turn west towards the pass. The heights immediately south of the town would be the responsibility of **1 and 3 Companies 59 Motor Cycle Battalion**.

Two artillery regiments were brought up during the night to give

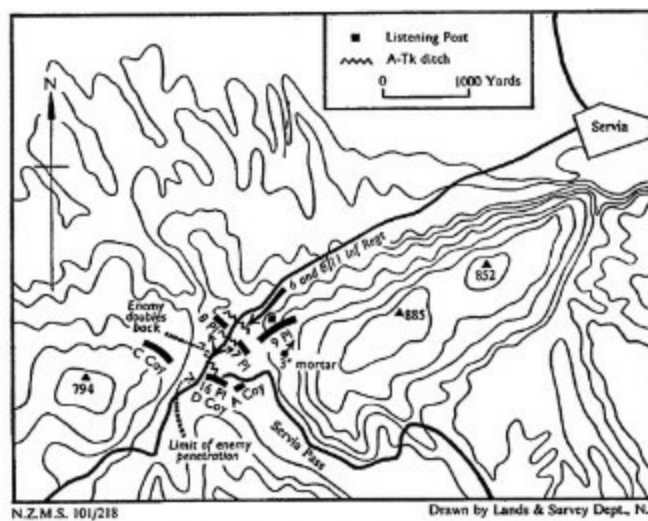
their support and the road south from **Kozani** was cleared to let the engineers build up their equipment. But they were unable to construct any bridge that night; the best that they could do was to cut an approach to a possible ford. In that stretch, however, the current was so swift that after one tank had been lost in the river the anti-tank guns and heavy supporting weapons of the infantry were left on the north bank.

This setback did not delay the two companies of infantry, for they continued unsupported and by first light were approaching the pass. The fact that they had captured two Greeks who were escaping on horseback had strengthened their belief that the Allies were making a hurried withdrawal and were not likely to offer any serious resistance. But when the greater part of the force was just through or in the deep cutting between the first two anti-tank ditches the New Zealanders opened fire and by 8 a.m. the two companies had been destroyed, only a few stragglers getting back to report the disaster.

This neat and spectacular success was the work, for the most part, of A Company 19 Battalion. In the stretch between the eastern and central anti-tank ditches, 7 Platoon had been on the south side and 8 Platoon on the north side of a deep cutting through the projecting ridge. South of them on the rising ground between the road and the base of the escarpment the sections of 9 Platoon were

¹ *9 Panzer Division war diary: Corps orders, 11.30 p.m., 12 April 1941.*

² *9 Panzer Division war diary, 14 April.*



ENEMY ATTACK ON 19 BATTALION, MORNING 15 APRIL 1941

ENEMY ATTACK ON 19 BATTALION, MORNING 15 APRIL 1941

extended eastwards towards **Servia**, with a listening post between them and the road, and a 3-inch mortar group behind and above them. In the pass itself just above the road fork to **Grevena** was 16 Platoon D Company; across the road on the other side of the pass, higher up and north-west of the junction to give covering fire, were C Company and a section from 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion.

About 5.30 a.m. the German companies were casually walking towards the pass, and having no apparent order they had not been any different from the normal groups of straggling refugees.¹ At the tank trap they paused and made no attempt to keep silent. As a result the New Zealand sentry who went down to investigate thought that they were just another party of Greeks and turned back to his trench on the hillside. The more forward of the Germans went across the tank obstacle, through the deep cutting between 7 and 8 Platoons and almost to the point where the road branched south towards the pass and west towards **Grevena**. Then it was that

¹ The two Greek captives with their horses may have created this false impression. Actually a legend developed that the Germans were disguised as Greeks. In the first reports of HQ 4 Brigade there was no suggestion of this; but within twenty-four hours the Germans had been led by Greek civilians, one of whom 'was killed in the action.' He was probably one of the two

unlucky escapees. According to Graf von Sponeck, 'the enemy had used a military device which our troops were not prepared for ... be allowed the companies to run into a trap.'

the centre section of 9 Platoon, having been warned by the listening post of unusual movement about the cutting, opened fire on the too-confident enemy.

In a few minutes there was action all along the highway. Grenades tossed into the cutting soon silenced that section and left the Germans in two groups. Those through the cutting and strung out towards the crest of the pass were under fire from 16 Platoon D Company to the east and from C Company and the Australian machine-gunners to the west. And when they turned on their tracks there were 7 and 8 Platoons of A Company waiting on either side of the cutting. The north side of the road was somewhat broken so the more serious German attack was across the southern slope between the road and the base of the escarpment in the sector held by 7 Platoon. As the defences of this platoon had been designed to meet an attack from **Servia** the retreating Germans were at first successful, reaching the crest of the ridge and firing down into the weapon pits on the forward slopes. Two men had been killed and another wounded before Private **McKay**¹ leapt up and tossed a grenade which killed the German officer and two of his men. Private **Frain**² with his tommy gun halted another group and Corporal **Cooke**³ came over from 8 Platoon with a section which killed and captured more Germans. As a result, any Germans between the road and the escarpment had, before long, surrendered or taken cover.

On the north side where the slope dropped more sharply into the gully the Germans found it difficult to withdraw. They did attempt to clamber up the ridge above the cutting but Private **Wellman**⁴ was able to jump out of his trench and use his tommy gun so effectively that the attack faded away.

Thus when daylight came those Germans west of the cutting were in an impossible position. Overlooked and harassed by 9 Platoon and the 3-

inch mortar detachment, they could find no security in the central anti-tank ditch. Their only shelter was in its extreme northern end, and from there a mortar continued to be a nuisance until silenced by the 2-inch mortar with 8 Platoon. After that there was no further opposition and by 7.15 a.m. some seventy Germans from the west of the cutting were being marched back over the pass.

To the east of the cutting the Germans who had endeavoured to move up to support the forward sections had quickly been forced

¹ **Pte R. McKay**, m.i.d.; born NZ 5 May 1914; house painter; killed in action 27 May 1941.

² **Pte P. J. R. Frain**; born NZ 28 Jan 1918; clerk; killed in action 20 May 1941.

³ **Cpl G. C. Cooke**; born **Wellington**, 17 Mar 1906; clerk; died of wounds 23 May 1941.

⁴ **Pte R. C. Wellman**, MM; **Wanganui**; born NZ 7 Apr 1913; labourer.

to take cover from the fire of all three platoons of A Company and, when the light permitted, from the long-distance fire of the company's snipers. Some Germans were able to crawl away towards the **Aliakmon River** but after daylight the majority were forced to stay where they were. The commander of *8 Company 11 Infantry Regiment* who escaped reported that 'the enemy was firing accurately at every individual man who emerged from cover anywhere.'¹ Their only chance was to surrender and this they hastened to do, until by 8 a.m. another fifty prisoners were on their way back to 4 Brigade Headquarters. In all 3 officers and 150 other ranks were captured;² the casualties for 19 Battalion were two other ranks killed and five wounded.

Once the front was secure the wounded were evacuated and the

German weapons and equipment examined. It was remarkable how much the enemy had been carrying: drum magazines for the light machine guns, range-finders for the mortars, a wireless set which had, fortunately, been wrecked very early in the engagement and a surprising number of stick bombs. Many of them had been used but they had not been so destructive as the Mills grenades. The only one to do any damage had severely injured the feet and legs of Private **Lee**,³ who had, however, most gallantly continued to fill Bren magazines for the rest of the engagement.

Neither side had called for the support of its artillery. In the early stages Headquarters 19 Battalion had thought that it had to deal with nothing stronger than a German patrol; the Germans had expected such support to be unnecessary.⁴

The rest of the day saw only one other attempt to approach the pass. In the morning shortly after the advanced guard had been overwhelmed another group of Germans, some seventy strong, had moved along the road from **Servia** towards the lines of A Company 19 Battalion. 'They were coming along the road with a file on each side ... and a scout about 50 yards in front with rifle slung. They were simply marching towards the position. Unfortunately a section of No. 9 Platoon opened up too soon before they came into view of Nos. 7 and 8 and they immediately took cover.'⁵ The 3-inch mortars were then used and the Germans withdrew.

It is now known that a machine-gun platoon and a mortar section from *9 Company 11 Infantry Regiment* had been ordered to cross the river and support the units detailed to capture the pass. At first

¹ Lieutenant Hoffman, report on action of *8 Company* on 14 and 15 April 1941.

² *11 Infantry Regiment* gave its losses as 21 killed, 37 wounded and 168 missing.

³ **Pte A. V. Lee, MM; Waihi; born Mercer, 24 Apr 1909; clerk; wounded 15 Apr 1941.**

⁴ **When Brigadier Puttick asked one prisoner why the companies had advanced so carelessly the Austrian infantryman explained that some German officers were not very good at tactics!**

⁵ **A Company report.**

light they had crossed on pontoons, moved on to **Servia** and, hearing the sound of fighting in the pass, had marched forward to play their part. They had endeavoured to use their mortars against A Company, but the disadvantage of being under observation from 'those commanding British positions' ¹ had soon forced them to withdraw to the nearby village of Avles.

Two companies from *59 Motor Cycle Battalion* came over about the same time with the intention of forcing the steep escarpment immediately south of **Servia** and opening the pass from the rear, probably by the steep track from the township to the centre of 18 Battalion. But as the official report afterwards stated, 'the fact that they had crossed the river much later than 6 and 8 Coys saved them from sharing these companies' fate. One company had entered **Servia** but the other was in the open when the New Zealanders ² overlooking them opened a destructive fire which pinned them down in what cover they could find.'

Unaware both of this opposition and of the disaster in the pass, von Sponeck shortly after 9 a.m. sent two companies from *I Battalion 11 Infantry Regiment* to support the forward units. In the clear light of that hour no movement about the bridge and along the road from it into **Servia** could be hidden from the observers on the crest of the escarpment. The shellfire from the defending artillery was therefore unpleasantly accurate. *No. 2 Company*, which attempted to cross above

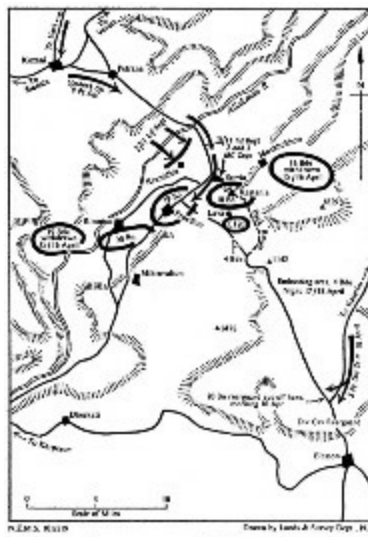
the demolished road bridge, suffered so heavily that the attempt was abandoned. *No. 1 Company* crossed downstream but lost several pontoons and left equipment on a sandbank in the middle of the river.

By then von Sponeck had learnt of the disaster in the pass but he knew nothing about the motor-cycle companies in the **Servia** area. *No. 2 Company I/11 Infantry Regiment* was therefore ordered to get across the river in spite of the shelling. He led the way himself but it meant a swim before they could get to the other side. Once over he spent an uneasy day, always disturbed by the shellfire from the southern ridges and increasingly worried about the chances of a counter-attack. As every movement was now 'visible from the craggy hills nearby', ³ von Sponeck decided to withdraw to better positions between the village and the river. His patrols continued to operate below the pass, but once darkness came the battalion withdrew towards the Aliakmon bridge, where it formed a screen about the bridgehead and waited to repel any New Zealand counterattacks.

¹ Report on events on 15 April 1941: Lieutenant Behrends, 9 (MG) Coy 11 Inf Regt, 16 April 1941.

² 18 Battalion.

³ *11 Infantry Regiment* operational report, 16 April 1941; 'Report on Attack Stena Portas', Graf von Sponeck.



4 BRIGADE AT SERVIA, 15-18 APRIL 1941

The day had thus been a triumph for 19 Battalion and its commander, **Lieutenant-Colonel Varnham**. Consequently it was almost tragic that he should that day have the misfortune to be injured and eventually to be evacuated. The battalion was taken over by Major Blackburn. ¹

The day had been equally exciting for the New Zealand units along the ridges overlooking the valley. On the extreme right flank 18 Battalion had seen German vehicles drawing up under the trees on the north side of the river and troops assembling near the ruins of the bridges. The German artillery had been shelling all possible positions and their aircraft had been roaring backwards and forwards across the front. Those men who stayed still were reasonably safe but anyone moving across country was likely to be strafed. For his courage and endurance as runner between headquarters and the forward platoon, Private **Moors** ² of 18 Battalion was afterwards awarded the Military Medal. The heaviest raid came in the early afternoon when the whole front was attacked by dive-bombers. The only casualties were three other ranks of C Troop 31 Anti-Tank Battery, attached to 20 Battalion on the left flank and killed by a direct hit in their slit trench.

Conditions were no easier for the signallers. Lines were always being broken but, strafing or no strafing, they had to maintain them,

particularly in the 19 Battalion sector at the crest of the pass. For such hazardous work Lance-Corporal **Scott**³ and Private **Spilman**⁴ from 20 Battalion and Private **Porter**⁵ from 19 Battalion were awarded the Military Medal.

In its turn 6 Field Regiment was hard at work, particularly between air raids, when the enemy were shelled as they attempted to cross the river in pontoon boats or to clamber across the demolished bridge. In the German reports this very accurate shellfire restricted all serious movements about the bridge and along the road towards **Servia**. 'The bridge building operation made no progress because the enemy's accurate shellfire made it impossible at times to work on the bridge and destroyed what work had been done.'⁶

And over the crest of the pass the Advanced Dressing Station

¹ Lt-Col C. A. D'A. Blackburn, ED, m.i.d.; **Gisborne**; born **Hamilton**, 8 May 1899; public accountant; CO **19 Bn** Apr–Jun 1941; CO 1 Army Tank Bn (NZ) Jan–May 1943.

² Pte **H. Moors**, MM; **Whangarei**; born Okaihau, 20 May 1911; farm labourer; wounded 20 May 1941.

³ L-Cpl **A. G. Scott**, MM; **Auckland**; born England, 22 Sep 1918; bank officer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

⁴ Capt **A. K. Spilman**, MM; **Marton**; born Stratford, 7 Aug 1912; stock inspector; QM 20 Regt, Apr 1944–May 1945; wounded 24 Nov 1941.

⁵ L-Cpl **W. Porter**, MM; **Te Whaiti**; born **Levin**, 19 May 1918; timber worker; wounded 22 May 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁶ *9 Panzer Division war diary*, 15 April.

of A Company 5 Field Ambulance had a heavy day, 53 wounded being admitted, of whom 40 were German prisoners. To complicate matters the station was raided four times and had, in consequence, to be shifted still farther back into the pass.

TO GREECE

THE GERMAN PLANS ARE CHANGED, 15-16 APRIL

The German Plans are Changed, 15-16 April

As a result of this unexpected resistance the German commanders now adjusted their plans. That night, 15–16 April, General Stumme of **XXXX Corps** ordered **9 Panzer Division** to spend the next day preparing to attack on 17 April. But the divisional commander, General Hubicki, knowing the country and realising that he needed still greater artillery support, met Stumme and convinced him that another attack would be both pointless and expensive. Instead **XXXX Corps** would ‘tie the enemy down in the **Servia** position’ and thrust through **Grevena** towards **Elasson**, thereby outflanking the Aliakmon line. There need be no further attack in the **Servia** sector; if the line was outflanked through **Grevena** the British would have to withdraw.

TO GREECE

FIRST MOVES IN THE WITHDRAWAL FROM SERVIA PASS

First Moves in the Withdrawal from Servia Pass

The British in their turn had been completing their plans and conducting the first stages of their withdrawal to **Thermopylae**. On 15 April, before **Anzac Corps** operation orders were issued, Blamey had warned Mackay that the units west of **Servia Pass** and forward of the **Aliakmon River** must be withdrawn immediately. Nineteenth Australian Brigade and 26 New Zealand Battalion had then begun their exhausting withdrawal. ¹ In the afternoon when the shelling and strafing were reverberating through the pass, Mackay, Puttick and Allen, the commander of 16 Brigade, met at Headquarters 4 Brigade and planned their withdrawal to **Thermopylae**. A quick withdrawal of 16 Brigade from the mountains east of the pass was difficult to arrange, but before morning the battalions were coming down ² from their positions above the snow line. Fourth Brigade was to have withdrawn from **Servia Pass** on the night of 18–19 April, but during the afternoon of 16 April Headquarters 6 Australian Division instructed Puttick to withdraw one night earlier, 17–18 April.

The first withdrawal from the pass itself took place on the morning of 16 April when 2/2 Australian Field Regiment, having been warned of the heavy shelling of the crossroads, chose to move back through Karperon and **Dheskati** with 26 Battalion and some of 19 Brigade. The regiment eventually joined the left-flank screen that was assembling at Zarkos; the New Zealanders went to the

¹ See pp. 241–4.

² See p. 252.

6 Brigade area south of [Elasson](#); and the Australian infantry joined the rest of 19 Brigade at [Dhomokos](#), south of [Pharsala](#).

For the units about the pass it was a wet, misty day with no enemy air raids but much heavy shelling about the road junction behind the pass in the 19 Battalion area. In the hills above [Servia](#) 18 Battalion was undisturbed, but 20 Battalion on the western escarpment, having a clear view of the withdrawal of 26 New Zealand Battalion and **19 Australian Brigade and no instructions about its exposed left flank, was intensely curious about the changing front. When explanatory orders did arrive **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger** prepared to refuse his left flank, but before any changes were made his battalion was ordered back to its old position astride the road at Lava.**

At 8 p.m. the battalion transport withdrew without headlights along the narrow, slippery road. No losses were suffered at the still heavily shelled crossroads where there was already ‘a smell of death’, but two trucks, one Bren carrier and two motor-cycles were lost over the crumbling banks. The companies marched back, avoiding the dangerous crossroads but spending a wretched night in the wind and rain. They were not in position until 5 a.m. 17 April; ‘they were plastered from head to foot with mud, and were grey with fatigue, but they reported no stragglers.’¹

Several of the artillery units withdrew the same night, 2/3 Australian Field Regiment and one troop of 64 Medium Regiment to [Dhomenikon](#), and another troop of the last named to [Dhomokos](#). The Australians had no difficulty getting out but the mediums in that rain-soaked country were not out on the highway until 3 a.m. on 17 April. Sixth New Zealand Field Regiment and one battery of 7 Medium Regiment who had maintained a steady harassing fire all through the night were now the only units of artillery left in the [Servia Pass](#) area.

By then it had been decided that 4 Brigade would be withdrawing that night, 17–18 April. Twentieth Battalion would be the rearguard, with **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger responsible for blowing the**

demolitions that were now being prepared along the line of withdrawal. D Company in Lava village would screen the withdrawal of 18 Battalion, B Company on the main highway would do the same for 19 Battalion. They in turn would withdraw through A Company, with C Company and one platoon of A Company back in the pass to cover the southern approaches. Eighteenth and 19th Battalions would begin their withdrawal at 9 p.m. and on reaching the main highway south of the gorge would move off to the **Thermopylae** area without waiting to form groups

¹ **Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 24.**

or complete units. The embussing point was south of Sarandaporos bridge, well back in the foothills on a small but distinct plateau which made an ideal turning point for vehicles.

Once the two battalions had embussed, the covering companies of 20 Battalion would move out through a screen of Bren carriers with which **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger** and Lieutenant Kelsall, after blowing the demolitions, were to bring up the rear.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL OF 4 BRIGADE, 17-18 APRIL

The Withdrawal of 4 Brigade, 17-18 April

A fog which shrouded the front on 17 April limited visibility to no more than 500 yards. Any movement by the Germans could not be clearly observed, but that weakness was more than balanced by the chances there now were of making an unobserved and undisturbed withdrawal. The artillery, instead of thinning out at 7 p.m., began to move at 1 p.m., the arrangement being that A Troop 6 Field Regiment, having the advantages of a reasonably sound track, would come out last.

The guns of 7 Medium Regiment were out by 5 p.m. E Troop 6 Field Regiment had also reached the highway, but it had taken three tractors and a team of men to move each gun across the rain-soaked slopes. The others were being brought out with less difficulty when the mist lifted and left the two guns of A Troop out of the pits and in full view of the enemy. The shellfire which soon came over was heavy but two drivers, Gunners **Bunton**¹ and **Tomblason**,² resolutely went in with their quads and retrieved them. That done, all guns, including those of 31 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, were on the main highway and soon rattling south towards **Larisa** and **Thermopylae**.

Once darkness came the infantry were on the move. Nineteenth Battalion, having brought in its outlying platoons the previous night, lost no time before it started the gruelling ten-mile march from the pass to the embussing point. The demolitions³ prepared by the engineers in the pass were blown so there was little chance of a German attack. The greatest threat was the consistent shelling of the highway from the crossroads above the pass to a point not very far from the embussing point.

The withdrawal of 18 Battalion from the high country east of **Servia** was more exposed and more complicated. A section rejoining

¹ **Gnr R. W. Bunton**, MM; Staveley; born **Tasmania**, 9 Aug 1916; tractor driver; wounded 23 Nov 1942.

² **Gnr T. W. J. Tombleson**, MM; Rakauoa, **Gisborne**; born **Gisborne**, 21 May 1917; sheep-farmer.

³ The delayed action mines were successful. According to stories learnt in the prisoner-of-war cage in **Salonika**, one mine exploded eight hours later and killed several German engineers.

D Company and parties from B Company, moving in broad day-light, seem to have attracted attention for the two tracks on the forward faces were under artillery fire from last light until nearly midnight. However, C Company by following one on the left flank reached Lava and, after five exhausting hours, came out on the main highway. Here it was met by Brigadier Puttick, who hustled it off down the road towards its transport.

Battalion Headquarters, A, B and D Companies withdrew by the 'back' route, which was safer but longer, the track circling above Lava and then joining the highway much lower in the gorge. The mountain village, **Kastania**, was under shellfire when they began their march but no casualties were suffered. The great difficulty of the route was the broken terrain, made all the more complicated and confusing by the blackness of the night. 'We moved in single file and we moved fast. It was dark; the rocks of the track showed up a ghostly blurr. It was a killing pace and with full equipment.... Having been told nothing we had no idea exactly what the position was Gradually we all became imbued with the gravity of the situation and this was confirmed when the order was given to abandon packs the tension increased in bounds in an atmosphere of doubt and some bewilderment.' ¹ The company commanders emphasised the necessity of getting out to the highway before daybreak, but in spite of their appeals the long strung-out columns broke, separated and dropped behind schedule.

The first company reached the road about 2 a.m. and reported to **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger**, who was waiting with the rearguard at the demolition point north of the Sarandaporos stream and opposite the rough country round which the companies were withdrawing. These men knew nothing about Battalion Headquarters and the other two companies nor could they suggest their possible route, except that it was to the east of the road. The senior officer, Captain **Lyon**,² did however point out that the men would be exhausted and would have neither the strength nor the time to march on to the turning point where the trucks had now been assembled. He was therefore sent on by **Kippenberger** to collect unit transport to convey the exhausted groups to that area. To make this possible, the sappers in their turn had to lift the surface charges from three demolitions in the 12-mile stretch between the rearguard and the embussing point.

In the meantime the companies of 20 Battalion had withdrawn. B Company had come in after covering the withdrawal of 19 Battalion. Some of 18 Battalion had passed through Lava, but now

¹ Cpl E. A. Howard.

² **Capt W. J. Lyon**; born **London**, 15 Feb 1898; MP (**Waitemata**) 1935–41; served in 1914–18 War; killed in action 26 May 1941.

that the great majority was coming out by the high route D Company 20 Battalion could begin its own withdrawal. The other companies down the gorge were on or close to the highway so before long the battalion, tired and muddy, was back at the assembly point, embussed and on its way to **Larisa**.

That over, **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger** and Lieutenant Kelsall waited for the transport to come up and for the missing companies of 18 Battalion to reach the highway. Second-Lieutenant Green¹ with the Bren carriers from 20 Battalion provided a screen to the north; the

Colonel waited at the 'tin hut' north of the Sarandaporos stream and on the western side of the long valley leading up to **Servia Pass**. All was darkness, with shells coming over from the Aliakmon and small parties of men calling out across the gully. Each group in its turn was urged to stumble down to the creek and clamber up the face to the highway and the waiting vehicles.

At 5 a.m., long after the rearguard should have been clear of the pass, small groups from 18 Battalion were still appearing out of the darkness. **Kippenberger** decided that he must wait still longer, for it was hardly likely that the Germans would be able to clear the demolitions in the **Olympus Pass** and cut off the line of retreat.

As it was possible for the demolition charges to be blown too soon, Lieutenant **Dawson**² was despatched to warn the engineers that the highway must be kept clear for a swift withdrawal. The RAP and WT trucks were sent back but **Kippenberger**, with the rest of the rearguard, waited until dawn, still collecting stragglers from 18 Battalion.

The same night German patrols sought to find out why the New Zealand shellfire had now ceased. At 6 a.m. they reported that 'the strongly constructed positions' were unoccupied, but the units which hastened to advance were held up by the blown bridges, the minefields and the demolitions.

¹ 2 Lt S. J. Green; born **Invercargill**, 6 Jan 1910; commercial traveller; killed in action 25 May 1941.

² Lt **T. E. Dawson**; born **India**, 26 May 1913; clerk; died of wounds 19 Apr 1941.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 13 – THE CRITICAL DAYS, 17-18 APRIL

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TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL OF 5 BRIGADE

The Withdrawal of 5 Brigade

IN the initial stages of the campaign General Wilson had thought that the weakest sector of the Allied front was to the south and west of **Monastir**. And until 16 April the greatest danger did seem to be from the German forces approaching **Kalabaka** and threatening to encircle **Larisa** from the west. But after that date the danger point was the **Pinios Gorge**, which had to be held until the brigade groups had withdrawn: 5 Brigade from **Mount Olympus**, 6 Brigade from the **Elasson** area and **Savage Force** from the western approaches to **Larisa**. The period, 17–18 April, was therefore one of rearguard engagements and carefully timed withdrawals.

The first step—a temporary one for the night of 16–17 April— was the assembly at **Elevtherokhorion** of **Duff Force**,¹ with one group in positions astride the road from **Mount Olympus**, another covering the road from **Servia** and another the approaches from the west of **Elasson**. Next day the greater part of the Divisional Cavalry Regiment,² for a short period under the command of **Anzac Corps**, returned to build up a more formidable rearguard. B Squadron carriers³ and N Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery remained in the **Dheskati** area and the squadron's armoured car troop was sent hastily to join **Allen Force** outside the **Pinios Gorge**, but A and C Squadrons assembled at **Elevtherokhorion** and took over rearguard duties at the road junction. **Duff Force** was then disbanded, O and P Troops 34 Anti-Tank Battery coming under the command of the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, 3 Company 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion leaving to support 6 Brigade at **Elasson** and the three carrier platoons from 6 Brigade returning to their respective battalions.

The two squadrons of the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment were in position by nightfall. A Squadron, with P Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery attached, covered the junction of the roads from **Servia**

¹ See p. 231. HQ 7 A-Tk Regt, 34 A-Tk Bty less one troop, 3 Coy 27 MG Bn and the three carrier platoons of 6 Brigade.

² See pp. 236– 7.

³ When the withdrawal from this area was complete the carriers were to join the rest of the squadron with **Allen Force**.

and **Olympus Pass** and the bridge immediately to the south of it. C Squadron formed an outer screen in the undulating country to the north: one troop, with part of O Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery attached, was along the road towards **Mount Olympus**: another troop was some six miles north along the road towards **Servia**. The remainder ¹ of the squadron was in reserve, while Regimental Headquarters was well back in the gorge some two miles north of **Elasson**.

The day was also one of movement for the battalions of 5 Brigade, who since their withdrawal to the crest of the **Olympus Pass** on the night of 16–17 April had been preparing to form another line. Twenty-second and 28 (Maori) Battalions, supported by 5 Field Regiment and the remaining two-pounders of 32 Anti-Tank Battery, were just south of **Ay Dhimitrios**. South-east of them on the lower slopes of **Mount Olympus**, 23 Battalion was holding the rock-strewn col above the village of **Kokkinoplos**. It was to have withdrawn that night, 17–18 April, but about 9 a.m., when thick mists enveloped the mountains and screened the highway from the view of the German airmen, **General Freyberg** visited the pass and decided that the brigade should make an immediate withdrawal. So during the afternoon of 17 April when the **Divisional Cavalry** rearguard was moving into position, the trucks of 4 RMT Company with 5 Brigade aboard were hastening south towards **Larisa**.

The brigade orders, issued before midday, explained that the German columns threatened to encircle **W Force**. The Division was consequently

withdrawing to the **Volos** area and from there to the **Thermopylae** line. Fifth Brigade was to carry out 'a preliminary withdrawal to the **Velesinon- Almiros** area near **Volos**.' No exact position was named but it was explained that there would be provosts posted along the **Larisa-Volos** road to give directions.

In the **Olympus Pass** area the first unit to march back to the waiting trucks would leave at 12.30 p.m.; in the **Kokkinoplos** area the move would begin at 1 p.m. To avoid congestion it had been arranged that the main highway from **Larisa** to **Lamia** should be reserved for 6 Australian Division. The New Zealand convoys, after reaching **Larisa**, would therefore turn south-east through **Velesinon** to the **Almiros** area south of the port of **Volos**. From there the trucks would return to pick up 6 Brigade; the troops would wait until the transport which had taken 4 Brigade from **Servia** to **Thermopylae** could return to take them to the same area.

The immediate problem was the actual disengagement of the battalions. Had the enemy been able to follow up during the night

¹ Less the two troops with 1 Armoured Brigade.

of 16–17 April the movement would have been difficult, but it was only in the 23 Battalion sector that any fighting took place.

On the wet morning of 17 April the companies, after their exhausting march ¹ across the mountainside, were in or about **Kokkinoplos**. A Company (Captain **Watson** ²) was on the col itself, with a platoon on either side of the path, another in reserve in a hollow towards the centre and headquarters on the track itself. The other companies were below in the deserted village attempting to dry themselves or to get some rest. About 7 a.m., however, they were suddenly disturbed by the enemy, who appeared through the swirling mists about the col and opened fire on A Company headquarters. Some of the forward posts were driven back but 10 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant **Begg**) of B Company

hurried up in time to prevent the enemy getting between A Company and the village. Groups from C and D Companies came up later and the line was eventually steadied after a period of exciting close-quarter work in which Sergeant **Mulhern**³ and Private **Brook**⁴ distinguished themselves. The casualties had been one killed and two wounded, both of whom became prisoners of war. After that it was more an exchange of mortar and machine-gun fire, with the Germans' fire seemingly coming in from the heights on both flanks.

The end of this stalemate came late that morning when Lieutenant-Colonel Falconer, acting on verbal instructions from Brigade Headquarters, ordered the battalion to withdraw immediately to the highway some six miles to the south-west. The companies were deployed to meet any German advance and their withdrawal might have been difficult, but the mist was now to their advantage and they withdrew successfully with C Company as rearguard and the four machine guns of 10 Platoon 27 Battalion giving covering fire.

The German force, *3 Engineer Company* and *12 Machine Gun Company* of *72 Infantry Division*, afterwards reported that 'The terrain was extraordinarily difficult. The mountain track to **Kokkinoplos** ran over hills 1200–1400 metres high. All the equipment (heavy mortars) had to be carried. The darkness was so complete that men wandered from the track, and from 2400 to 0400⁵ hrs the column had to rest. At 0600 hrs the personnel of an equipment dump were surprised. 10 men were captured and taken along with us. At 0800 hrs the force again came up against heavy opposition north of **Kokkinoplos**. 3 Engr Coy and 12 MG

¹ See pp. 266–7.

² Lt-Col C. N. Watson, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Tinwald, 8 Jan 1911; schoolteacher; CO 26 Bn 20–29 Jun 1942; CO 23 Bn 29 Jun–15 Jul 1942; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ Sgt H. D. Mulhern, m.i.d.; Opotiki; born NZ 31 May 1912;

linesman.

⁴ **Pte J. E. Brook**, MM; born NZ 12 Mar 1918; labourer; accidentally killed 24 Jun 1942.

⁵ German time was one hour earlier than GMT, British two hours earlier. Thus 4 a.m. German time was 5 a.m. British time.

Coy attacked at once. By 1100 hrs they had lost 5 killed (including 2 platoon commanders) and 5 seriously wounded. In this action 2 PW were taken—the enemy (New Zealanders) defended their positions extremely sternly and courageously. Our casualties were caused by direct hits by mortar bombs or accurate MG fire ... about 1200 hours the enemy abandoned his positions.’ ¹

The enemy, exhausted and without food, left 23 Battalion free to reach the village of **Pithion**, where a hot meal had been prepared, and to march on again to the transport in which the battalion ² joined the never-ending stream of vehicles moving southwards.

Fourth Field Ambulance was already away from the **Olympus** Pass. The other units, after marching some three miles back to the trucks at **Pithion**, reached the highway about 3 p.m., first 22 Battalion, with 11 and 12 Platoons 4 Machine Gun Company and 32 Anti-Tank Battery, less three troops, then 5 Field Regiment, less A and F Troops, and finally 28 (Maori) Battalion.

The rearguard (A Company 22 Battalion, C Company 28 (Maori) Battalion and F Troop 5 Field Regiment) had a relatively undisturbed withdrawal about 6 p.m. The Germans made no effort to follow up. There had been some movement about **Ay Dhimitrios** and some seven rounds had been fired to ‘play safe’, but otherwise there was no action. *No. 1 Company 2 Infantry Regiment of 2 Panzer Division* recorded that it reached the village about 11 a.m., capturing ‘an English rearguard one section strong’, which was probably the unfortunate Maori group that

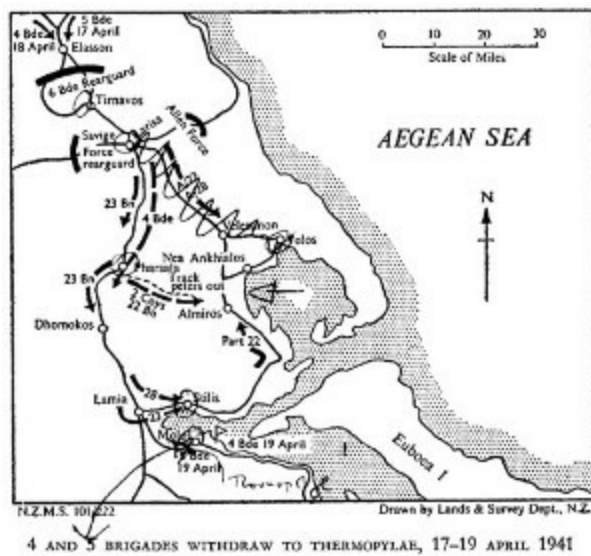
had lost touch with the battalion during the withdrawal on the night of 16–17 April. Then, hearing that the armoured units of the division would be able to get through the demolitions, the advanced guard had rested in the village.

The units of 5 Brigade had therefore been free to move south towards **Larisa** and the coastal road ³ to **Volos**. From there they were to have been taken south to **Thermopylae** by the 4 Brigade transport; their own transport was to have returned for 6 Brigade. That morning, 17 April, a reconnaissance party from New Zealand **Divisional Headquarters** found that the road from **Larisa** to **Volos** had become, in certain stretches, quite impassable for motor vehicles. **Freyberg** had consequently to arrange with Mackay for the New Zealand convoys to use the main highway through **Pharsala** which had been reserved for the Australians. He also informed Blamey

¹ Report by Captain Baacke on action by *72 Division* advanced guard.

² The three troops of 32 Anti-Tank Battery attached to the battalion were taken by trucks from the Ammunition Company to RHQ 7 Anti-Tank Regiment at **Tirnavos**. One section from G Troop (Lt R. J. Moor) remained with the battalion until 23 April, the section arguing that as it had no anti-tank guns it was more useful where it was with three Bren guns.

³ See p. 231.



4 AND 5 BRIGADES WITHDRAW TO THERMOPYLAE, 17-19 APRIL 1941

that ‘the destination of the **5 Bde** is now all put out ... I am on my way to direct our column, and go back to the fwd Div HQ where the withdrawal is proceeding, and is in a rather bad state.’¹ The same message asked Blamey to get the Corps provosts to stop the 5 Brigade column half-way along the **Larisa- Lamia** road so that the transport could return for 6 Brigade, as in the original plan. This change caused great confusion, for **Freyberg**, not knowing where 5 Brigade would be halted, was unable to give precise instructions at the **Larisa** end. Along the road itself it appears that some staff officers had been told by **Anzac Corps** to halt 5 Brigade in areas clear of the road, the transport to return for 6 Brigade, while others, including provosts on normal duty, knew only that all New Zealand transport should have been on the coastal road and made every effort to divert it to that road.

Twenty-third Battalion, the first to move, stopped north of **Larisa** about 3 p.m. and the men enjoyed one of the features of the withdrawal: free access to the tinned luxuries of a ration dump. The transport officer attached to the convoy left to get further instructions, those drawn up by 5 Brigade Headquarters not having reached the unit. From **General Freyberg** himself he learnt that the

¹ No time is given on this message but Blamey did not receive it until 10 p.m. Long, p. 109.

Larisa– Volos road was impassable and that the convoy must continue south towards **Lamia** until directed by a staff officer to turn east. So about 5.30 p.m. the convoy moved off again through **Elasson** to **Larisa**, where the piles of rubble, the burning buildings and the crumpled bodies of Greeks and Australians were evidence of successful air raids. South again all the way to **Pharsala** were burnt-out vehicles and bomb craters, further evidence of the activities of the *Luftwaffe* and of the battalion's good fortune to be either just ahead or just behind the successive raids.

The transport officer had hitherto understood that the battalion would at some point move due east across the hills to **Almiros** and the coast road. A road turned to the east at **Pharsala**, but, when inspected, soon petered out, and Lieutenant-Colonel Falconer ordered the battalion to continue southwards over the mountains to **Lamia**. The vehicles were without lights, the road crowded and the successive directions not always clear. 'On this pass the utmost confusion prevailed. Orders and counter orders were given by various staff officers, and vehicles were turned and turned about again on the two way road.'¹ Nevertheless, when morning came the convoy was over the pass by **Dhomokos** and approaching **Lamia**. Still wanting instructions and not happy about the narrow coast road from there to **Volos**, Falconer called another halt and returned towards **Pharsala** in search of Brigade Headquarters. About midday he met Brigadier Hargest, who had been in the town attempting to hurry the traffic through the narrow streets. Hargest told him to go through **Lamia** and **Stilis** towards **Volos**. If the road became dangerously narrow for safety in the event of air raids the trucks were to be driven under cover in the adjoining olive groves. The convoy thereupon moved through **Lamia** and swung east towards **Stilis**. Just outside this village orders were received from Brigade Headquarters that the convoy was to go to the **Thermopylae** area. The vehicles were therefore driven back towards **Lamia** and then across the river flats towards the Pass of **Thermopylae**. The battalion's good fortune continued and by 8 a.m. the companies were under cover in their bivouac area.

Twenty-second Battalion, less A Company in the rearguard, had a more hazardous and more broken withdrawal. The column reached **Larisa**, where Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew was advised by **General Freyberg** that the eastern route through **Volos** was out of order; the convoy must continue south along the main highway until directed along a new route. The obvious turn-off was eastwards from **Pharsala**, but the more forward section of the column went through the township and into the great traffic

¹ Lt-Col A. S. Falconer, diary 17–18 April.

jam which was afterwards to occupy the attention ¹ of Brigadier Hargest. In this confusion it was impossible to turn, so Andrew at about 1 a.m. on 18 April decided to carry on to **Lamia** and from there turn off towards **Volos**.

But it was impossible to direct the long column already strung out for miles along the crowded highway. Second-Lieutenant **Donald** ² with 14 Platoon C Company went through to **Lamia**, where the provosts suggested the diversion east towards **Volos**, but he insisted on going south to **Thermopylae**. Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, with Lieutenant Armstrong and part of 11 Platoon C Company, went through **Lamia**, reaching a point north of **Almiros** about 8 a.m. on 18 April. B Echelon afterwards arrived in the same area.

D Company and C Company (less 14 Platoon), in all about 250 men, were however stopped at **Pharsala** and diverted down the third-class road, which faded away to a mule track in the area north-west of **Almiros**. Here the men were off-loaded and the transport proceeded to **Molos**. If Major Laws had not refused to turn off the main highway, B Company would also have joined this isolated group. As it was he took his company, less 11 Platoon, through to **Lamia** and turned east towards **Almiros**.

During the day Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew learnt from Headquarters 5 Brigade that the battalion was to move to **Molos**. His small group then returned, meeting B Company on the road and reaching the **Thermopylae** area about 10 p.m. Before leaving the **Almiros** area Andrew, acting on the information supplied by a Greek shepherd, sent Lieutenant **Hawthorn**³ by motor-cycle up the mule track towards **Pharsala** and the isolated companies. The senior officer, Major Hart, was advised to march the force towards the coast road while Hawthorn went back to arrange for transport.

The Maori Battalion had much the same problem. About 4.30 p.m. on 17 April the main body had withdrawn from **Olympus** Pass, halted as did the other battalions at **Pharsala**, and then, throughout the night, was driven along the main highway to **Lamia**. The convoy was switched east towards **Almiros**, but in the afternoon of 18 April fresh orders were received, the trucks were turned about and the battalion by 7 p.m. was in the **Thermopylae** area.

The rearguard companies⁴ had left the pass and caught up with the column at **Larisa**, but as the coast road was now repaired they

¹ Two liaison officers from Brigade Headquarters were left at the **Volos** turn-off to prevent further trouble.

² **Lt-Col H. V. Donald**, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Masterton**; born Masterton, 20 Mar 1917; company director; CO **22 Bn** May–Nov 1944, Mar–Aug 1945; four times wounded.

³ **Capt T. R. Hawthorn**; **Lower Hutt**; born NZ 24 Mar 1914; school-teacher; wounded 20 May 1941; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁴ A Company 22 Battalion and A Company 28 Battalion.

were sent to **Almiros** and left there to be picked up later—according to the original orders for 5 Brigade.

While waiting near the landing ground at **Almiros** they were joined by the two companies from 22 Battalion which had tramped over the hills from the **Pharsala** deviation. Their plight must have been known to Brigadier Hargest for, in addition to the trucks which he despatched to collect the rearguard group from **Almiros**, he sent Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew with another dozen vehicles. As a result both groups by midday 19 April had joined their respective units.

The brigade was now complete—and with remarkably few casualties considering the bombing that took place on 18 April when visibility had improved. On 17 April 4 Machine Gun Company (less 10 Platoon with 23 Battalion) had been bombed near **Larisa**, losing one truck and having three men wounded. The company eventually came through during the night, 18–19 April, and reached the brigade area near **Molos**, where 10 Platoon reverted to its command. The only other loss was a Headquarters 5 Brigade postal vehicle destroyed on 18 April near **Pharsala**. The reason for this immunity may have been the low clouds which limited air attacks on 17 April; it may have been good fortune, for all units reported raids before and behind their respective columns, but it was also due to the skill and determination of the New Zealand **Army Service Corps** drivers. There were scores of abandoned vehicles along the highway but few New Zealand ones.

The unfortunate changes in the original plan for the withdrawal of 5 Brigade, caused by rain which rendered the route to **Volos** temporarily unusable, gave rise later to a specific question submitted by Mr Fraser to an Inter-Services Committee in **Cairo**. Fuller details of this are given in **Appendix II** to this volume.

It is now clear that the trouble started when Force Headquarters listed the road from **Larisa** to **Volos** as one of the ‘four main withdrawal routes’. **Anzac Corps** then decided that it would be used by the Division and **Freyberg** accordingly issued his orders to 5 Brigade. When he learnt that the road had become impassable he acted swiftly, arranging with Mackay to use ‘his road’, advising **Anzac Corps** and warning his

battalions to continue along the highway from Larisa to Lamia. That done, there was little more that he could do. Confusion developed, but it was due to contradictory orders from officers of Anzac Corps who, because of delays in communication, were inadequately briefed about the changed route, and to the fact that the motor transport could not, as Freyberg had expected, be diverted east from the main highway to the coast road.

TO GREECE

THE REARGUARD ASSEMBLES AT ELASSON

The Rearguard assembles at Elasson

On 18 April, when 5 Brigade was approaching **Thermopylae**, 4 Brigade was clear of **Servia Pass** and 6 Brigade, now the rearguard, was completing its defences. To the north across the small plain the troops could see the town of **Elasson** and beyond it the golden domes of the monastery overlooking the entrance to the pass. Behind them was the mountain mass of Akrotiri encircled by two highways, each capable of taking heavy traffic. The more direct route, that to the east, had just been prepared for motor transport. The other, the more ancient, ran through a pleasant valley with picturesque villages and groves of poplar trees until it entered the gorge of the Sarandaporos River and circled south and east to the road junction at **Tirnavos**.

The approaches to this town had to be held until the night of 18–19 April. Twenty-fourth Battalion was to the east, astride the road and about five miles south of **Elasson**. There was little cover from vegetation and it was almost impossible to dig weapon pits, but the area had its advantages; any movement about **Elasson** could be observed and to the west of the road there were several gullies at most convenient angles for defensive fire. C Company was astride the road, covered by a section of L Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery. ¹ D and A Companies were to the west of the road.

Twenty-fifth Battalion had a somewhat different task. Its position was two to three miles north-east of **Dhomenikon** on the low rounded crests between that township and the villages fringing the western foothills. The position was not perfect but the undulations were distinct enough to provide some cover and the observation points gave a clear view of the pass and the roads south from **Elasson**. D Company was to the east covering a track to the village of Velesnikon; C Company, with B Company 24 Battalion, was astride the highway; B and A Companies

were to the west. In support there were, at first, J and K Troops of 33 Anti-Tank Battery.

Twenty-sixth Battalion, after its arduous withdrawal from the west of **Servia Pass**, was in reserve behind 25 Battalion and near **Dhomenikon**. Brigade Headquarters was on the eastern road, but the signalmen had laid a wire across the mountains to 25 Battalion. This was a difficult task, the value of which during the subsequent battle it is 'impossible to overestimate.'²

The strength of the supporting artillery changed with the fluctuating fortunes of **W Force**. Every effort had been made to build up fire power, but the desperate situations which arose on other sectors

¹ L Troop was withdrawn on 16 April to join **Allen Force** at **Tempe**.

² 6 Brigade report. See map on p. 304.

caused several rearrangements. Fourth Field Regiment, less 25 Battery,¹ had joined the brigade after dusk on 15 April and next day 26 Battery had been placed behind C Company 25 Battalion. But before it had settled in orders arrived from Headquarters Anzac Corps for the immediate transfer of a field battery and a troop of anti-tank guns to the **Pinios Gorge**. The only one available, 26 Battery² (Major **Stewart**³), was sent over with L Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery (Lieutenant **Longmore**⁴), and because the situation at **Tempe** appeared to be serious Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson of 4 Field Regiment went over in command. As two of the anti-tank guns had been in support of 24 Battalion, the right flank of 6 Brigade was left with no anti-tank weapons other than the unsatisfactory Boys rifles.

It had also been intended that 7 Medium Regiment, 6 New Zealand and 2/3 Australian Field Regiments should join 6 Brigade, but the situation at **Servia Pass** had forced a change in plans. The 2/3 Field

Regiment and one troop ⁵ 64 Medium Regiment had come south that night, 16–17 April, but 6 Field Regiment and one battery of 7 Medium Regiment remained at the pass and afterwards moved out with 4 Brigade.

On 17 April when Brigadiers Miles and Barrowclough had again discussed the strength of the artillery support, they had both been ‘apprehensive of an encircling movement by enemy AFVs round open country on the left or western flank and rear.’ They had decided that the greater proportion of the guns arriving that day must support 25 Battalion; the eastern flank would have no anti-tank guns and certain areas on its front would not be covered by the heavier artillery. ‘In the light of future events this decision was unfortunate, as the enemy did in fact attack by the Eastern route and not by the left flank. Guns on the eastern route would have been very effective’ ⁶

As it was, 2/3 Australian Field Regiment when it arrived that morning from **Servia** was sent to the area on the left flank vacated by 26 Battery 4 Field Regiment. One troop from 64 Medium Regiment arrived later, taking up positions behind 25 Battalion, and 5 Field Regiment when it came through that afternoon from Mount

¹ See p. 259.

² See **Chapter 14**.

³ **Col G. J. O. Stewart**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 22 Nov 1908; importer; CO 4 Fd Regt Aug 1942–Mar 1943, Dec 1943–Mar 1945; CRA 2 NZ Div 22 Feb–16 Mar 1945; wounded 3 Mar 1943.

⁴ **Capt K. A. Longmore**; **Wellington**; born NZ 15 May 1918; clerk; p.w. 23 Jul 1942.

⁵ The composite battery from 64 Medium Regiment was

already with **Savige Force**; the remaining troop was sent to **Dhomokos** as there was insufficient ammunition to justify its retention with either of the rearguards.

⁶ **NZ Artillery** report, Part III.

Olympus also went into position there. Twenty-seventh Battery (less A Troop) ¹ came under the command of 2/3 Field Regiment, while 28 Battery remained on wheels in reserve behind Headquarters 6 Brigade.

The supporting arms from **Duff Force** ² had come in from the road junction at **Elevtherokhorion**, the Bren-carrier platoons of 25 and 26 Battalions returning to their respective units along the western road, those of 24 Battalion (less one section) deploying along the eastern road to check any possible threat from the direction of the **Pinios Gorge**. No. 3 Company 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, another part of **Duff Force**, was divided in much the same way. One platoon, less a section, came under the command of 24 Battalion and the rest of the company joined 25 Battalion.

The demolitions in the area had been prepared by 6 and 7 Field Companies. In the eastern sector 7 Field Company had placed charges in the steep road leading up to the 24 Battalion positions and these, with artillery support from the west, would, it was hoped, provide adequate protection. The western approaches had been the biggest problem, the gradient being easier and the countryside more suitable for tanks, but Lieutenant **Rix-Trott** ³ with parties from 7 Field Company had prepared demolitions, wrecked bridges and placed mines alongside the two bridges over the **Xerias River**. They would be demolished after the withdrawal of the rearguard.

But in spite of all this work and the assembly of so many units, the overall situation was not reassuring. Brigadier Barrowclough had been told little about the fighting on the other fronts, but what information there was suggested that his force at **Elasson** was in danger of

encirclement from either flank. Twenty-first Battalion had withdrawn through the **Pinios Gorge** and it was quite possible that the Germans would strike westwards to **Tirnavos**, thereby cutting off 6 Brigade. **Savige Force** and 1 Armoured Brigade were to the west, but information about their movements was somewhat obscure and it was thought that the enemy could possibly encircle the brigade from the direction of **Trikkala**. The movement of 26 Battalion to **Dhomenikon** had been, in part, an effort to cover this exposed flank.

Nevertheless, the withdrawal had up to date been reasonably successful. In the afternoon and evening of 17 April 5 Brigade had withdrawn from **Mount Olympus**; during the night of 17–18 April 4 Brigade and the Australian units were coming through from **Servia Pass**. The only troops to the north of 6 Brigade were

¹ With 21 Battalion.

² See p. 285.

³ **Maj K. Rix-Trott**, ED; Uganda, **East Africa**; born South Africa, 7 Jun 1901; civil engineer.

the rearguard of 4 Brigade and the screen of anti-tank gunners and **Divisional Cavalry** at **Elevtherokhorion**.

TO GREECE

FOURTH BRIGADE COMPLETES ITS WITHDRAWAL, 18-19 APRIL

Fourth Brigade Completes its Withdrawal, 18-19 April

At first light on the morning of 18 April 4 Brigade was completing its withdrawal from **Servia Pass**. As yet all had gone according to plan: the Germans were held up by the demolitions and the convoy was making good time along the road to **Elasson** and **Larisa**.

The rearguard, on the other hand, was to be less fortunate. At 5.40 a.m. **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger**, having decided that all 18 Battalion had come through, gave instructions for the first of the remaining demolitions to be blown. 'The sound of this explosion alarmed further stragglers of **18 Bn** who came up within the next 20 minutes, and I then waited a further 20 minutes for a single straggler, blowing the second mine at 0620 hours. This additional delay was most unfortunate and if I had been aware that there was any danger of our retreat being cut off I think I would have abandoned these stragglers.'¹ The group then hastened south, blowing several demolitions at which the engineers had been anxiously waiting, and finally reporting to Brigadier Puttick at the assembly area by 7.40 a.m. With the brigade safely away from the pass, the Brigadier left to overtake the main body.

The last four demolitions were then blown and the rearguard moved off at 8.5 a.m., Lieutenant Kelsall leading with the 6 Field Company vehicles, then **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger** in his staff car and, at the rear, Lieutenant Green with three Bren carriers. Shortly afterwards the first German aircraft came over, so harassing the little column that it halted on three separate occasions before approaching **Elevtherokhorion** and the **Servia- Olympus** crossroads, which were covered by the rearguard from the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** and **34 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment**.

When the leading vehicles were some 400 yards away from the

bridge below the pass a shell whistled down the road, hitting one truck but causing no casualties. The anti-tank gunners, who had already observed a German force approaching from the Mount **Olympus** area, had thought that the rearguard was another German column. Lieutenant Kelsall, who jumped out to investigate, looked back up the road to see how the rest of the column had fared and was amazed to see that two tanks had come over from the **Mount Olympus** road and driven into the middle of the convoy. And coming over to support them were half-tracked vehicles with

¹ **Lt-Col Kippenberger**, report on operations of 4 Infantry Brigade rearguard, 17 and 18 April.

‘motorised infantrymen sitting up ... in rows of four like toy soldiers.’ Fortunately for him he turned about and saw Divisional Cavalry officers at the crossroads waving for him to come on. His truck was rushed over the bridge, up the curve of the road and over the ridge, where the **Divisional Cavalry** Bren carriers were lying ‘nose to tail in the lee of the hillside.’ ¹

The rest of the little convoy found it more difficult to get clear. Two or three aircraft dived down to bomb and machine-gun the open stretch of road, some of the vehicles were hit by shells from the tanks, and the engineers had to seek shelter along the roadside. It was impossible for **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger** to organise any counter-attack that would halt the tanks and supporting infantrymen. A two-pounder on portée had soon been silenced ‘and there were two bodies on the platform.’ ² Every vehicle had now stopped, dead and wounded sappers lay beside them and on the ridge above them German infantry were debussing.

With a small group of six the Colonel left the road for the western hills and tramped south all that day. Away to the left they saw on one occasion the narrow road ‘packed solid with German transport, head to tail, tanks and guns, lorry-loads of infantry’; on another ‘a group of

German officers in long greatcoats standing beside a house, looking at maps and southwards through their glasses.’³ Then, as they neared the lines of 6 Brigade, they were shelled by both the defending artillery and the German tanks, but they were eventually able, late that afternoon, to reach the lines of 25 Battalion and be accepted by a naturally cautious sentry.

In the meantime the 4 Brigade convoy had been moving smoothly through **Elasson** and southwards towards **Larisa**, from which centre it was to have left the highway and followed the **Almiros– Lamia** road to **Thermopylae**. But Brigadier Puttick, when he reported early that morning to Advanced Headquarters New Zealand Division, was advised to move with the Australian convoys along the main highway through **Pharsala**. The units do not seem to have expected any other route to be followed so the convoy continued south from **Larisa** without the confusion which was a feature of the withdrawal of 5 Brigade.

Yet the journey was more nerve-racking. The weather of 18 April was very different from that of the 17th. The drizzling rain and mist which had screened 5 Brigade during the early part of its withdrawal had now cleared away. The *Luftwaffe* was out in strength, dive-bombing and machine-gunning, almost unopposed,

¹ **Capt D. V. C. Kelsall.**

² **Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 31.**

³ **Ibid., p. 32.**

the 70 miles of highway between **Larisa** and **Thermopylae**. The **Royal Air Force** could now give little assistance. On 16 April the squadrons had started to withdraw from the airfields about **Larisa**, and for the next few days were dealing with the problem of operating from new fields when ground staffs moving south were jammed in the retreating column and

the refuelling and rearming parties coming north were blocked by the stream of southbound traffic. Worse still, two squadrons and their ground parties which had been detailed to go to the airfield at Amfiklia, just south of **Thermopylae**, had continued south to **Elevisis**, and could not from there give adequate protection to the retreating columns.

It was therefore inevitable that there should be much stopping and starting along the highway. The prescribed distance between vehicles was no longer kept and traffic often jammed the more narrow stretches, especially the cuttings south of **Ptolemais** and the long climb to the crest of the ridge at **Dhomokos**. On the appearance of the *Luftwaffe* lookouts would drum heavily on the roofs of the cabs, drivers would clamp on their brakes and passengers scurry into the fields for safety. Then when the sky was clear there would be an irritating waste of time when nervous individuals hesitated to come back and wrecked trucks had to be pushed off the highway.

The longest halt began about 9.30 a.m. with the hitting of a truckload of explosives and the wrecking of the embankment leading up to the bridge over the Mavrolongos River to the north of **Pharsala**. The northern half of the column then jammed up head to tail for nearly ten miles, presenting a perfect target for the *Luftwaffe*. The embankment was eventually repaired by Australian engineers, but it was 1.30 p.m. before the trucks were once again moving towards **Lamia**.

The raid at 9.30 a.m. had been followed by intermittent attacks throughout the morning and by 2.30 p.m. a continuous attack was being made. **Anzac Corps** Headquarters appealed to **W Force**, 'This road is our life-line for next few days and we must have air protection if humanly possible.' ¹ Little could be done but next day, 19 April, the two fighter squadrons operating over the plain of **Thessaly** had some success shooting down aircraft that had been harassing the columns about **Pharsala**. This would explain the occasion north of **Dhomokos** when the column was 'greatly cheered by three Hurricanes which suddenly appeared and downed three Stukas like pigeons.' ² But in most cases the efforts of the outnumbered air force were not observed by many of the

ground troops,

¹ **Anzac Corps** to BTG, O. 331. This was the second of two urgent messages.

² **Kippenberger**, p. 35.

hence their tendency, so far as air operations were concerned, to be unjustly critical of the desperate efforts undertaken so gallantly on their behalf.

As a result of these unpleasant conditions 4 Brigade Group did not reach **Thermopylae** until the night of 18–19 April. The infantry losses, considering the traffic blocks and the numerous air raids, were relatively low: 18 Battalion had three killed and twenty wounded; 19 Battalion had two killed and three wounded; 20 Battalion had some slight casualties. The artillery units were more fortunate. Sixth Field Regiment had been caught in the great traffic block south of **Pharsala** but, unlike 64 Medium Regiment, RA, which had suffered heavily when the Heinkels came over, all guns had been brought out and no casualties were reported. Thirty-first Anti-Tank Battery, which had left **Servia Pass** after 6 Field Regiment, was strafed several times along the highway and, after an ammunition truck was hit by a bomb, continued south in several groups. Battery Headquarters, some B Echelon vehicles and one gun were in **Molos** by nightfall, but the rest of the unit had been detained to support Brigadier Lee in his rearguard position at **Dhomokos**.

The British and Australian convoys had more trouble than this but it was the resulting loss of time that at this stage gave the Higher Command cause for concern. Early in the afternoon Anzac Corps Headquarters sent an officer forward to see if Generals Mackay and **Freyberg** with the rearguard could remain in position for another twenty-four hours. That, however, was impossible. When the officer reached Mackay's headquarters about 4 p.m. the Germans had already forced a

crossing ¹ of the Pinios River and were threatening to enter Larisa and cut the withdrawal route of 6 Brigade and Savige Force.

¹ See Chapter 14.

crew managed to pull back, covered by the next gun along the road. After firing several rounds and halting another tank, this gun team in its turn pulled back, losing the portée and gun in a bog. Sergeant Stobie ² and his crew then took to the hills and rejoined the unit some days later. The other anti-tank guns, those on the **Servia** road and the others on the **Mount Olympus** road, had, in the meantime, withdrawn behind A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment.

The enemy had meanwhile advanced not only along the road from **Mount Olympus** but also across the open country to the west. By so doing they were to reach the **Servia** road above the junction and cut off the withdrawal of **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger** and the 4 Brigade rearguard.

The next position held by the rearguard was a ridge on the south side of the **Elevtherokhorion** stream, manned by P Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery (Lieutenant **Moodie** ³) and a troop from A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment (Lieutenant **Robinson** ⁴). They had heard the sound of the guns as the tanks came through from **Mount Olympus** and had sent a motor-cyclist to investigate. He brought back news of the German approach and was followed, very shortly afterwards, by C Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** and the three guns of O Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery. Behind them from the **Mount Olympus** road German tanks could be seen moving westwards towards the road from **Servia**. At the same time **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger's** convoy suddenly came down that road and, by mistake, one of the P Troop guns opened fire upon it. But the immediate turmoil when two of the tanks cut into the little column made it quite clear to everyone that this was the 4 Brigade rearguard. Signs were frantically made to hasten the vehicles across the bridge, but only one truck ⁵ came over before the engineers were forced to demolish it. With the last of A Squadron, they then withdrew over the southern ridge under fire from the tanks now approaching over the undulating country between the two roads.

¹ **Bdr K. Titley; Auckland; born Awatoto, 22 Dec 1916; mechanic;**

wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; safe in Egypt Nov 1943.

² **WO II R. Stobie**; born Kirkcaldy, **Scotland**, 20 Dec 1900; labourer; wounded 5 Dec 1941.

³ **Lt-Col J. W. Moodie**, DSO, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1907; warehouseman; bty comd **4 Fd Regt** Nov 1942–Apr 1944; wounded 26 Nov 1941; comd **16 Fd Regt (K Force)** Aug 1950–Apr 1952.

⁴ **Lt-Col H. A. Robinson**, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Waipukurau**; born **New Plymouth**, 29 Sep 1912; farmhand; troop leader, later 2 i/c, Div Cav 1939–44; CO **18 Armd Regt** Mar–Jul 1944; **20 Armd Regt** Mar–Oct 1945; twice wounded.

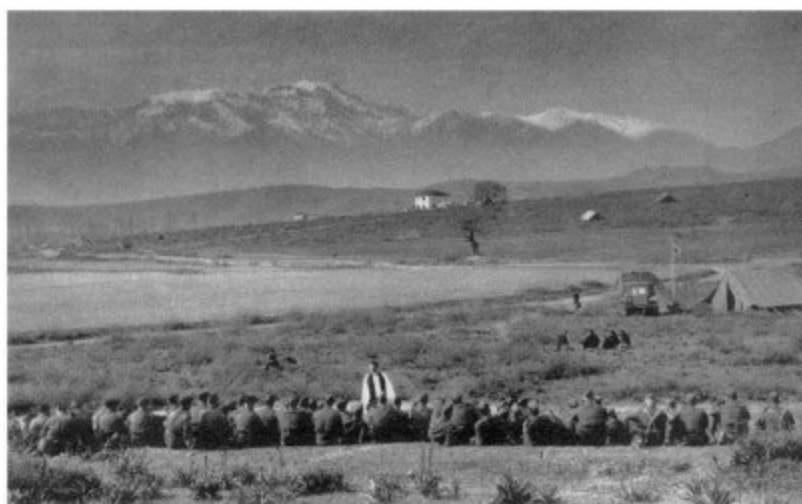
⁵ See p. 297.

The only German account is brief and somewhat exaggerated. *No. 5 Company 3 Panzer Regiment* had ‘a brush with 2 enemy tanks, destroying one. It pushed on and came up with a retreating column of enemy tanks and wheeled vehicles. The company opened fire from hull down positions on both sides of the road, while the leading platoon pushed on at full speed to the bridge 1 Km N W of Elefserokori [**Elevtherokhorion**]. This bridge was blown as the platoon approached....’¹ Unfortunately the Germans were not held up for any great length of time. A steep-sided ford was found just below the bridge and the tanks pushed on towards **Elasson**.

They had for some time been under fire from P Troop: Bombardier **Bellringer**² and Sergeant **Fowler**³ with their crews on the right of the road and Sergeant **Cutbush**⁴ on the left. These guns had opened fire when the tanks came south across country and down the **Servia** road. The forward gun (Bellringer's) disabled one tank and, although the orders were to withdraw after the demolition of the bridge, the crew fought on until the gun was knocked out by tank fire. Bellringer and another

gunner died of wounds and the rest were captured. The other right-hand gun (Fowler's) was very successful, disabling four tanks, two armoured cars and one heavy truck and making a successful withdrawal after manhandling the gun up a steep slope. Sergeant Cutbush's gun joined in the action but was ditched when the coupling hook broke. The approaching tanks had the gun under fire but Gunner **Schultz**⁵ dashed back and removed the firing mechanism. The force then withdrew through the gorge to **Elasson** and thence across the plain to the lines of 6 Brigade, where the remaining three guns of O and P Troops 34 Anti-Tank Battery went to the 26 Battalion area south of **Dhomenikon**.

During the engagement the small force covering the road from **Dheskati** to **Elasson** came through, first N Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery and then B Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, whose late appearance had led to some anxious but unnecessary preparations to cover its withdrawal. With Regimental Headquarters and detachments from several other units, the squadrons went through **Elasson** to positions across the plain towards the left flank of 6 Brigade. The *Luftwaffe* chose this moment to stage a raid and at the cost of one aircraft caused casualties in both the anti-tank and **Divisional Cavalry** units, one officer and four other ranks being killed and two officers and two other ranks wounded.



Bishop Gerard conducts a service near Katerini, March 1941. Mount Olympus is in the background

Bishop Gerard conducts a service near **Katerini, March 1941. Mount **Olympus** is in the background**



Vevi. Looking north-west towards the Yugoslav border from a New Zealand machine-gun post. Sections of the road to Monastir are seen to the top left

Vevi. Looking north-west towards the Yugoslav border from a New Zealand machine-gun post. Sections of the road to **Monastir are seen to the top left**



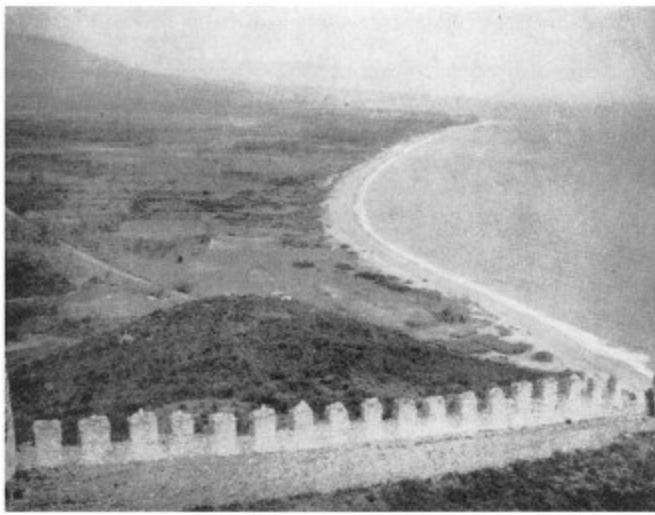
Blown bridge over the Aliakmon River

Blown bridge over the **Aliakmon River**



New Zealand positions at Platamon castle under bombardment—*from a German magazine*

New Zealand positions at **Platamon castle under bombardment— *from a German magazine***



The coastline north of Platamon from the castle. The railway runs to the left

The coastline north of Platamon from the castle. The railway runs to the left



Looking west towards Pandeimon from the castle

Looking west towards Pandeimon from the castle



Preparing gun positions in the Olympus Pass

Preparing gun positions in the Olympus Pass



Looking towards Katerini from the Maori Battalion positions in Olympus Pass—a post-war photograph

Looking towards Katerini from the Maori Battalion positions in Olympus Pass—a post-war photograph



New Zealand engineers build a road in the Olympus Pass

New Zealand engineers build a road in the Olympus Pass



Servia, looking towards the Aliakmon River—a post-war photograph

Servia, looking towards the Aliakmon River—a post-war photograph

19 Battalion's first German prisoners, Servia



19 Battalion's first German prisoners, Servia



Mist covers the withdrawal through the Servia Pass

Mist covers the withdrawal through the Servia Pass

New Zealand provost on point duty, Olympus Pass



New Zealand provost on point duty, Olympus Pass



The Pinios ferry—a post-war photograph

The Pinios ferry—a post-war photograph



German tanks ford the
Pinios River—*from a
German magazine*

German tanks ford the Pinios River— *from a German magazine*

¹ **3 Panzer Regiment** battle report, 15–19 April 1941.

² **Bdr T. C. Bellringer**; born NZ 19 Jun 1909; journalist; killed in action 18 Apr 1941.

³ **Sgt A. C. Fowler**; Tauranga; born Teddington, England, 28 Jun 1909; builder's foreman.

⁴ **Sgt W. J. Cutbush**; Christchurch; born Ross, 6 Feb 1909; clerk; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁵ **Sgt C. N. Schultz**, MM; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 19 Jan 1916; bootmaker; wounded 20 Apr 1941.

After the attack the columns moved on, the **Divisional Cavalry** taking up a covering position on the left flank of 25 Battalion. As soon as they had passed through, Lieutenant **Thomas**¹ with a subsection from 7 Field Company demolished sections of the road in the narrow gorge to the north of **Elasson**. The German tanks which came through shortly afterwards were held up there for several hours.

¹ **Capt G. I. B. Thomas**, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Christchurch, 15 Apr 1899; civil engineer; p.w. Dec 1941.

TO GREECE

SIXTH BRIGADE COVERS THE WITHDRAWAL, 18 APRIL

Sixth Brigade covers the Withdrawal, 18 April

At 6 Brigade Headquarters the day had opened with the receipt of disturbing information from the south-east. About 6 a.m. a liaison officer reported that the enemy was in the village of Gonnos and probing southwards towards the Pinios River. Brigadier Allen expected to be closely engaged and to have difficulty in withdrawing. The position of 6 Brigade was now less secure. If the Germans thrust westwards across the foothills of **Mount Olympus** from Gonnos to **Tirnavos** they could block the withdrawal of 6 Brigade, and it was always possible that they might attempt to isolate Allen Force, 6 Brigade and **Savage Force** by landing parachute troops on **Larisa** airfield.

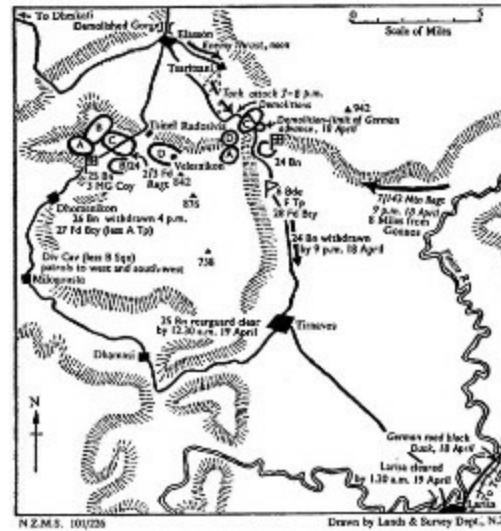
Brigadiers Barrowclough and Miles acted swiftly. Headquarters 5 Field Regiment and 28 Battery 5 Field Regiment, then in Divisional Reserve, were sent forward, F Troop to join the 26 Battalion carrier platoon and protect the eastern approaches from Gonnos towards **Tirnavos** and the rest of the force to cover **Larisa** airfield from the south.

Then about 8 a.m., after Brigadier Puttick had reported that 4 Brigade had almost completed its withdrawal from **Servia Pass**, Headquarters 6 Brigade learnt that the enemy had attacked the rearguard at **Elevtherokhorion**. This was most disturbing. It had been expected that the demolitions in the **Mount Olympus**² and **Servia** passes would delay the enemy for at least one or two days. As it was, the Germans had cut off the rearguard of 4 Brigade and, although gallantly opposed by the anti-tank guns at Elevtherokhorion, were about to come through the defile towards **Elasson**. They appeared about 11 a.m.

The necessary delay was imposed by the artillery. The 4.5-inch guns of the troop from 64 Medium Regiment immediately opened fire and continued until the late afternoon to harass the more distant targets.

Then when its ammunition was exhausted it withdrew to **Dhomokos**. At the same time the German column had been halted

² See p. 269.



6 BRIGADE REARGUARD ACTION AT ELASSON, 18 APRIL 1941

by the demolitions and harassed by the 25-pounders. The 2/3 Australian Field Regiment, which had been ordered to engage with heavy concentrations any enemy forces which appeared, had carried out these instructions ‘in a most praise-worthy way.’ ¹ So although the guns had not been used in a strictly anti-tank role their shellfire had ‘a strongly deterrent effect on enemy tanks and many enemy tank movements were stopped and dispersed by our long range gunfire.’ ² Due to the amount brought back ³ some days before by 5 Field Regiment, there was no shortage of ammunition. The 2/3 Field Regiment ⁴ fired 6500 rounds during the day, the paint

¹ NZA report, Part III.

² 6 Brigade report.

³ See p. 260.

⁴ This regiment afterwards supported the New Zealand Division most efficiently at **Kriekouki** on the 26th and at **Porto Rafti** on the 27th. Its commander, Lt-Col H. W. Strutt, took charge of the New Zealand artillery in **Crete**.

of the gun barrels blistering with the heat. And the lesson for the Division was that even confident tank crews hesitate to move through concentrations of shellfire.

The Germans, however, showed considerable enterprise and determination. Undeterred by the demolitions and the shellfire, they turned eastwards across very rough country and concentrated just off the secondary road between **Tsaritsani** and **Elasson**. By 6 p.m. many infantry carriers and about thirty tanks were in the area supported by covering fire from their own artillery. As several tracks ran down from there to the highway below 24 Battalion, it was obvious that the expected tank attack would be on that front and not across the open country to the west before 25 Battalion. And to make the task more difficult for the defenders, the demolitions made that morning along the road to 24 Battalion's position had been very disappointing. In half an hour a working party could have cleared the way for wheeled traffic. Without explosives for further demolitions, the battalion had no counter to the possible tank attack other than the normal infantry equipment and some pounds of gelignite.

The preparations for the withdrawal that night had, however, been going on very smoothly. The Bren-carrier platoon of 26 Battalion had been sent to support F Troop 5 Field Regiment by patrolling the open country east of **Tirnavos**. Sixth Field Ambulance, which had had a Main Dressing Station near the township and an Advanced Dressing Station behind each of 24 and 25 Battalions, had thinned out, leaving ambulance cars with the independent groups. The B Echelon transport of the battalions had left early that morning, passing through **Larisa** to join the convoys now hastening to the area behind **Thermopylae**. The parties moved separately but all had an exhausting day, particularly

when they were part of the long column, nose to tail and two deep, which for several hectic hours had been bombed outside **Pharsala**. They all reached **Molos** that night and were soon under the shelter of the olive trees, but several trucks had been damaged and many men killed.

Later in the morning **Divisional Headquarters** learnt that there would not be enough motor transport to shift the whole of 6 Brigade. The DAQMG, Major **Ross**,¹ suggested that a train could be sent from **Larisa** and Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry hurried there about midday to investigate. At the railway station he met two sappers from 19 Army Troops Company, one of whom as an engine-driver was convinced that a train could be assembled, provided the bombing was not too severe. Gentry returned to

¹ **Lt-Col A. B. Ross**, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; born NZ 25 Apr 1899; civil servant; DAQMG NZ Div Mar 1941–Jun 1942; AA & QMG 1–27 Jun 1942; killed in action 27 Jun 1942.

Divisional Headquarters, leaving the engineers to assemble the engines and rolling stock. Orders were then sent to 26 Battalion and about 4.30 p.m. the companies left for **Larisa** in the trucks of an English transport unit. The journey to the siding two miles south of the town was no different from that of any other road party on 18 April. Outside **Larisa** the troops had to debus and scatter about the fields while some Stukas attempted to wreck the bridge over the Pinios River. They failed, but one private was killed by a bomb splinter. The unit then continued on its way through the battered town to the open country and the siding with its collection of damaged carriages and wagons.

Fourth Reserve Mechanical Transport Company, which was to bring out 24 and 25 Battalions, had meanwhile assembled to the rear of these units with instructions that the convoy must go south to **Larisa** and from there follow the secondary road to **Volos** and **Thermopylae**. But late that afternoon the failure of **Allen Force** to hold the **Pinios Gorge**¹ made it necessary to safeguard this route. The battalions, instead of driving

straight through to **Thermopylae**, were ordered to stop at **Nea Ankhialos** and **Velestinon** and block the possible encircling movement by the enemy from **Tempe** towards **Lamia**.

The more direct threat to 6 Brigade was the armoured force which had, ever since 5.30 p.m., been assembling below 24 Battalion. Its supporting artillery was now shelling more heavily and the attack was expected at any moment. But the day dragged on and at 7.30 p.m., when the withdrawal began, there had still been no movement by the tanks. A Company and 14 Platoon C Company had no difficulties but 13 and 15 Platoons were very close to trouble when the German armour moved forward about 8 p.m. The guns of 2/3 Australian Field Regiment away to the west in the 25 Battalion area forced the lorried infantry to take cover, but the thirty tanks continued to lumber forward, firing steadily and supported by colourful tracer fire curving over from all angles. They passed the forward section of 15 Platoon, forcing it to withdraw hurriedly over the ridges, but at the first demolitions the commanders hesitated, probably because the obstacles in the fading light appeared more formidable than they actually were. The attack gradually lost momentum and by 9 p.m. 13 and 15 Platoons were hurrying through the darkness to the lorries. Away out on the left flank 17 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant **Reynolds**²) had opened up with Brens and anti-tank rifles, but the concentrated

¹ See pp. 324– 32.

² **Maj J. W. Reynolds**, DSO; **Hamilton**; born **Hamilton**, 15 Jan 1919; bank clerk; GSO III (Ops) 2 NZ Div Mar–Aug 1943; **BM 6 Bde** Nov 1944–Jun 1945; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

fire from the group of tanks soon forced it and the other platoons of D Company to withdraw to the waiting trucks.

There were no casualties but it was a close call. Had the artillery not delayed the tank attack until last light the battalion would probably

have been overwhelmed. Instead, it had slipped away. The engineers blew another set of demolitions and at **Tirnavos** Brigade Headquarters, with Bren-carrier support from 24 and 26 Battalions, waited astride the road for 25 Battalion to come down the western highway.

The 24 Battalion convoy continued on its way, passing through **Larisa**, where many buildings were on fire, and then turning eastwards towards **Volos** and the coast. About five miles beyond the town the lights of trucks were seen approaching from the east and many feared that they came from the German column that was emerging from the **Pinios Gorge**. To everyone's relief they were Australian, part of **Allen Force** withdrawing from **Tempe**. Shortly afterwards **General Freyberg** appeared, ordered all lights to be switched on and sent the column on its way. By 2.30 a.m., 19 April, the battalion was at **Nea Ankhialos**, where the companies debussed and the transport continued south. Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth with his unit rearguard arrived about 6.30 a.m.

There was less urgency about the withdrawal of 25 Battalion. The machine and anti-tank gunners had engaged odd targets at long range and 2/3 Australian Field Regiment had been shelling continuously, but no enemy force seriously threatened the battalion. Small detachments had consequently been free to make an early withdrawal. One battery of 2/3 Australian Field Regiment left shortly after 26 Battalion. B Troop 5 Field Regiment left at 7 p.m. and with F Troop from the eastern road moved for the **Volos** area, where the brigade was to make a temporary stand.

The main body, with B Company 24 Battalion and other units, embussed about 8.30 p.m. and passed through **Tirnavos** shortly after 24 Battalion. Some vehicles were ditched and had to be abandoned along the highway which was rapidly breaking up, but before dawn the convoy reached its destination south of **Velestinon**.

The rearguard ¹ (Major **Williams** ²), with the Bren carriers from **Tirnavos**, was to cover the withdrawal of the whole brigade. The **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, ³ with the remaining eight guns of

¹ C Coy **25 Bn**, the carrier platoon **25 Bn**, 7 Pl 3 MG Coy, N Tp 34 A-Tk Bty, one tp 2/3 Aust Fd Regt.

² **Lt-Col C. J. Williams**, ED; **Opotiki**; born Lydbrook, England, 16 Apr 1907; schoolteacher; Chief Instructor, NZ Tactical School, Feb–Sep 1942; Chief Administrative Officer, International Refugee Organisation, **Germany**, 1947–50; Director of Budget and Management, International HQ, IRO, Geneva, 1951–52; Principal, **Opotiki College**.

³ Less B Squadron with **Allen Force** in the **Pinios Gorge**.

34 Anti-Tank Battery under command, was to follow up the rearguard and advise the engineers so that they could blow the demolitions when all troops were through. Once through **Larisa** it was to keep in touch with its B Squadron, ¹ which was to cover the withdrawal of **Allen Force** from **Tempe**.

At 7 p.m. the carrier platoon had taken over the company areas, the remaining guns of 2/3 Field Regiment were firing intermittently and C Company, still astride the highway, had been detailed to put up flares and tracers until the time of withdrawal. Then at 8.30 p.m. C Troop 5 Field Regiment, south of **Dhomenikon**, began to shell the road towards **Elasson** and continued to do so until ordered to follow up the main convoy of 25 Battalion. C Company then marched back to its trucks and, with the supporting arms and last guns of 2/3 Field Regiment, left at 11.30 p.m. The **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment followed up with one two-pounder anti-tank gun on a portée in case the enemy followed up too quickly.

At **Tirnavos**, where the 24 Battalion Bren carriers were waiting, Brigadier Barrowclough ordered the units to get through to **Volos** as quickly as possible. The engineers waiting at the bridge just north of **Larisa** were told that they could demolish it and the column went through the almost empty town. Streets were cluttered with rubble,

wrecked vehicles and the bodies of both Greek and British soldiers. Away to the north-east the scattered flares and the sound of irregular fire suggested that **Allen Force** was still in contact with the German force coming through the **Pinios Gorge**, but the column was undisturbed and able to reach the **Volos** area next morning, 19 April.

Two isolated units had to solve their own particular problems. Headquarters 5 Field Regiment and 28 Battery (less F Troop) had gone south that morning to cover **Larisa** airfield. At 7.30 p.m. **General Freyberg** ordered the detachment to move north through the town and then eastwards along the road to **Volos**, but the stream of southbound traffic was such that the gunners had to retire with it to the **Thermopylae** area. The other detached unit, 26 Battalion, completed its journey south by train.

¹ See pp. 333, 338–9.

TO GREECE

26 BATTALION COMPLETES ITS WITHDRAWAL—BY TRAIN

26 Battalion Completes its Withdrawal—by Train

Late that afternoon, 18 April, the 26 Battalion convoy ² had reached a siding some two miles south of **Larisa**, where some six volunteers from 19 Army Troops Company had assembled a rake of carriages for the relief train. The *Luftwaffe* had successfully bombed the area, leaving twisted lines, wrecked carriages and a useless water system, but the engineers had patiently carried over petrol cans of water to their engine and all was ready for a move that night. Lieutenant-Colonels Gentry and Page, using a 1:1,000,000 tourist map of **Greece**, decided that the train should be taken to Kifissokhori, a siding to the south of **Thermopylae**.

At 8 p.m. the battalion moved off, Lieutenant-Colonel Page with the transport column by the main highway and Major Samson with the companies on the train. The former travelled through the night but bomb craters so delayed all traffic that the trucks were not over **Dhomokos** Pass before daylight. The inevitable air attacks then developed, but the dramatic appearance of Hurricanes from the **Athens** airfield gave some relief to the column. Two Stukas were shot down; the trucks moved off again and eventually reached the B Echelon group some miles east of **Thermopylae**.

The train pulled out with Sappers **Smith** ¹ and **Gibson** ² as engine-drivers. There was insufficient coal so some had to be found along the route; the headlights of the engine were smashed but the cab lights could be used for map and gauge readings; there was no signal system but a torch could be flashed to the crews in the brake vans. Moreover, neither of the drivers had been over the track before and much had to be left to providence and their intuition.

At first all went well, a derelict engine at Doxara station providing much-needed coal and water, but the absence of lights and the number

of abandoned trucks on the line cost much time Each bridge and tunnel had to be checked. While the line was thus being cleared more and more refugees clambered aboard the roofs, the couplings and the footboards. As a result the engine stopped near the crest of the range and desperate measures had to be taken. The last five carriages, full of Greeks, were uncoupled, all possible pressure was built up and the train at last reached the crest, where more coal and water were obtained.

As two of the abandoned cars had been brake vans the descent was made at a most dangerous speed, the train lurching round curves and racing through tunnels and across bridges. There was one mishap with obstacles on the permanent way which set the engine wheels out of alignment, but the descent was completed and the train switched off the main line towards **Lamia**, some five to six miles to the east.

Here there was some delay, the engine-drivers stressing the need for a new engine and brake vans, the Greek officials insisting that there must be a Greek crew to interpret Greek signals. The solution was to attach the carriages to a train already assembled for Cypriots and Australians. This had just been done when the *Luftwaffe* came over, killing several Australians, damaging carriages and cutting the line behind and in front of the new engine. The New Zealanders were sent back out of the danger spot; Sappers Gibson and Smith, assisted by an Australian driver, made up another train and handed it over to a Greek crew. Then, despite protests from the Greek stationmaster and an attempt by Greek soldiers to clamber aboard, the train was taken back to the main line, where the men of 26 Battalion were collected from the fields of corn and poppies in which they had been sheltering.

After a near collision with an up-train in the valley south of **Lamia**—this may explain the excitement of the stationmaster—there was no further trouble. Night came on and the train entered the mountains to the south. The troops slept unaware of the spectacular gorges, the seventeen tunnels and the wonderful bridge across the Asopos River, and at 9.30 p.m. they were in the valley which leads to **Thebes**. The train eventually stopped at Kifissokhori, a siding from which a road led north

to the divisional area about **Thermopylae**. As no transport was available, the men spent an unpleasant night in the open, but next day, 20 April, the British RTO in the area provided rations and arranged for the Royal **Army Service Corps** to transport C and D Companies the 40 miles to **Molos**. In spite of crowded roads and casualties from air raids, they joined the B Echelon group about 5 p.m. The other companies marched for about three hours but were eventually picked up by New Zealand **Army Service Corps** vehicles and taken to the battalion lines within the olive groves.

² See p. 306. For an account of a similar train journey see Peter Fleming, *The Listener*, **London**, 1 Dec 1949.

¹ **Spr L. L. Smith**; born NZ 5 Dec 1911; lorry driver; p.w. Apr 1941.

² **Spr R. C. Gibson**; **Wanganui**; born Ilford, England, 16 Mar 1906; locomotive driver.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL THROUGH VOLOS

The Withdrawal through Volos

Meanwhile at **Nikaia**, a village just south of **Larisa**, Headquarters New Zealand Division had been deciding the route of withdrawal for 6 Brigade. The main highway through **Pharsala** was still clogged with traffic but the DAAG, Major **Peart**,¹ had been able to use the road from **Larisa** to **Volos** and the Australians had reported that repairs to some 200 yards would make it passable for heavy traffic. The CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton, had therefore been ordered to arrange for its immediate improvement.

‘It consisted of a dead straight earth embankment, flanked by deep ditches, in process of being metalled ... with care and in daylight it was passable’ Beyond it there was a washed-out stretch ‘where the muddy ruts seemed bottomless.’ The rest of the road was reasonably good.

¹ Lt-Col J. N. Peart, DSO, m.i.d.; born **Collingwood**, 12 Feb 1900; schoolmaster; CO **18 Bn** Nov 1941–Mar 1942; **26 Bn** 1 May–20 Jun 1942, 29 Jun–4 Sep 1942; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

All available engineers were sent over and under the direction of Lieutenant **Chapman**,¹ 3 Section 6 Field Company, a deviation was prepared and marked before nightfall.

At 6 p.m. Headquarters New Zealand Division attempted to move north to **Larisa** in order to turn south-east by this route, but it was almost impossible to advance against the stream of traffic. To complicate matters the leading vehicles, when attempting to make such a move, caused a congestion of traffic which attracted the attention of the Stukas. The rear of the headquarters column suffered some damage, but after the raid it struggled forward again, until an officer appeared

with the alarming story ² that the Germans were in **Larisa**. The convoy was then turned about and directed south by the normal route. Movement was slow that night and next day there were delays because of air attacks about **Dhomokos**, so it was not until the night of 19–20 April that all the vehicles had reported at **Divisional Headquarters** on the coast road east of **Molos**.

The few vehicles which did get north from **Nikaia** on the night of 18–19 April took the GOC, his GSO I, and several other officers to the **Larisa** crossroads. Here the General met 6 Brigade and hustled it south-east ³ along the newly repaired road towards **Volos** and the east coast, where it was to be the rearguard covering the withdrawal of **Allen Force**.

Behind 6 Brigade was Major Williams with the rearguard, which went through **Larisa** about 1.30 a.m. when the town was almost empty of Allied troops and the sound of fighting could be heard along the road to **Tempe**. The column turned off along the narrow swamp road towards **Volos** and about dawn caught up with the last vehicles of 6 Brigade. Williams was then ordered by **General Freyberg** to take up a defensive position astride the road leading into the town. Any stragglers from **Allen Force** were to be assisted and all information collected about the action at **Tempe** and the fate of 21 Battalion.

Still near **Larisa** were the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, less B Squadron, and the engineers who had blown the bridge over the Pinios River to the north of **Larisa**. Once through the town the regiment had been halted and several attempts made to get into touch with B Squadron, which was acting as rearguard for **Allen Force**. This squadron was expected to withdraw about 3.30 a.m. but there were no signs of it, nor of **Allen Force**. Finally, about 5 a.m., when Very lights were glowing in the distance and the

¹ **Capt St.G. W. Chapman**, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Lower Hutt**, 23 Apr 1915; engineering student; wounded 26 Apr 1941.

² See pp. 340 and 342.

³ See p. 306.

rattle of heavy vehicles came over from the north-west, Lieutenant-Colonel Carruth decided that the Germans must be approaching. The regiment moved off and about ten miles along the road to **Volos** found the remnants of B Squadron and scattered groups from **Allen Force**.¹ The whole group continued south and by midday had withdrawn behind the rearguard organised by Major Williams.

¹ See Chapter 15.

TO GREECE

SAVIGE FORCE, INCLUDING SOME NEW ZEALAND DETACHMENTS, WITHDRAWS FROM KALABAKA

Savige Force, including some New Zealand detachments, Withdraws from Kalabaka

The diversion of 6 Brigade along the **Volos** route left the main highway clear for the force withdrawing from **Kalabaka**. There had, at first, been some confusion about the actual date. On 16 and 17 April Brigadier Savige had been visited by four different liaison officers. 'The first discussed administrative arrangements, the second ... conveyed the order from **Anzac Corps** that Savige Force was to hold its positions until midnight on the 18th, when its withdrawal would be covered by the **1st Armoured Brigade**. The third arrived ... with the written Corps instruction, which provided that Savige should withdraw his main bodies to Zarkos during the night 17th-18th but leave a rearguard at **Kalabaka** during the 18th. An hour and a quarter later a liaison officer ... arrived from the **6th Division** with instructions to withdraw that night covered by the **1st Armoured Brigade**.' ² The officer also reported that the road eastwards from **Trikkala** to **Larisa** was 'jammed with vehicles of the armoured brigade and vehicles, mules and men of the Greek Army, and that the bridge over the Pinios east of Zarkos had been demolished and a by-pass road, through **Tirnavos**, was very boggy.' ³

The destruction of the bridge had been quite unintentional. On 16 April the engineers of 6 Field Company had decided what explosives were necessary to blow the bridge at the appointed time, but next morning two officers from 7 Field Company appeared on the bridge and suggested that a different amount should be used. To settle the argument a ten-pound charge was exploded on what was considered a relatively unimportant girder. It proved the effectiveness of both charge and girder for one entire span dropped into the river. As General Wilson afterwards noted, 'The middle of a withdrawal is not the time for experiments of

this sort.’⁴

The position of Brigadier Savige was seriously threatened by this miscalculation. ‘The road behind him was packed with vehicles, a

² Long, pp. 109–10.

³ Ibid., p. 110.

⁴ Wilson's report, Part III, para. 4.

bridge on the only reasonably good road back had been broken, and he still needed time to complete demolitions aimed at delaying a German advance from **Grevena**.’¹ First Armoured Brigade, as he very well knew, was away to the rear and quite unable to cover his withdrawal. Moreover, although the Germans had not yet appeared, he thought that it was necessary to cover the western flank for yet another day. He therefore suggested to General Mackay that instead of withdrawing on the night of 17–18 April the force should remain until the night of 18–19 April.

At 1.30 a.m. on 18 April, however, orders arrived for an immediate withdrawal, otherwise the force would not be able to get through the bottleneck at **Larisa** before the enemy came south from **Elasson** or, more probably, westwards from the **Pinios Gorge**. **Savige Force** had therefore to concentrate about **Sin Thomai** to the east of the demolished bridge, reconnoitre the **Zarkos** position and inform Headquarters 6 Australian Division of its expected dispositions at 5 p.m., 18 April.

The engineers of 6 Australian Division had fortunately been able to find alternative crossings of the **Pinios River**. By going a few miles north of the wrecked bridge the units could cross by another near **Sin Thomai** or, by making a long detour along a secondary road, they could reach **Tirnavos** and the highway towards **Larisa**.

The withdrawal was therefore possible and 2/11 Battalion went back

before dawn to its rearguard position at Zarkos, getting into position by 10 a.m. A company from 2/5 Battalion and 5 New Zealand Machine Gun Platoon, covered by C Troop 25 Battery 5 New Zealand Field Regiment, pulled back at 11 a.m. on 18 April, leaving 2/2 Australian Field Company, which brought up the rear to blow sections of the road.

Seven cruiser tanks and two troops of C Squadron Divisional Cavalry Regiment had been detailed as part of the rearguard, but both groups went back through **Larisa** to the area of Headquarters 6 Australian Division during the night of 17–18 April. The armoured cars taking the long circuitous route to the north through **Tirnavos** had been bombed and riddled with machine-gun bullets. Corporal King, who had taken part in the first action at Bitolj, ² was fatally wounded whilst firing the Vickers from his armoured car.

At 11.30 a.m. the Pinios River once more became a problem for those organising the withdrawal. A German bomb exploded the demolition charges on the bridge north of Sin Thomai. Some troops on the west bank were then ferried over but their trucks had to

¹ Long, p. 110.

² See p. 195.

be switched north to **Tirnavos**, south to the bridge at **Larisa** and thence along the east bank to pick up the waiting companies.

Arrangements had also been made by General Mackay for the next rearguard, 2/11 Battalion at Zarkos, to move back to the west of the river and cover the left flank until 3 a.m. on the night of 18–19 April. As the bridges had now been wrecked and because the flank could be covered just as well from the east bank, Brigadier Savige preferred to have his companies ferried over that evening.

The 2/11 Battalion had been taken over by 8 p.m. and 2/5 Battalion

then left for the **Brallos Pass** west of **Thermopylae**. Next morning 2/11 Battalion moved off and was through **Larisa** about 4 a.m., by which time 6 New Zealand Brigade had withdrawn from **Elasson** and part ¹ of **Allen Force** had passed through from the **Tempe** area.

Those who were clear of **Larisa** continued south through **Pharsala**, through the Australian rearguard at **Dhomokos**, through **Lamia** and then across the valley to the **Thermopylae** line. The *Luftwaffe* was still bombing and strafing the highway. Twenty-fifth Battery 5 New Zealand Field Regiment, after suffering casualties as it crossed the range to **Lamia**, continued along the coast to **Molos**. No. 5 Machine Gun Platoon moved south with 2/11 Battalion and remained attached until it reached Headquarters 17 Brigade at **Brallos** and was sent eastwards from there to join the regiment in the coastal sector.

¹ See p. 342.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 14 – THE PINIOS GORGE

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TO GREECE

THE SELECTION OF THE DEFENCE LINE

The Selection of the Defence Line

ON the afternoon of 16 April 21 Battalion had withdrawn from the **Platamon** tunnel to the western end of the Pinios Gorge, that narrow cleft between Mounts Ossa and **Olympus** which is famous in history as the Vale of **Tempe**. Into one of the two tunnels on the north bank the last Bren carrier had towed a railway box-car with which **Lieutenant Jones** and his section from 19 Army Troops Company, by wrecking the wheels and undercarriage, had effectively blocked the line. On the south bank the engineers had then blown two demolitions in the road, but they were not really formidable obstacles. No. 10 Platoon B Company (Second-Lieutenant **Rose** ¹) had been posted some three miles east of **Tempe** to cover the second or nearest crater; the other platoons had remained about a mile east of the village in the valley which runs up from the river to the village of **Ambelakia**. The demolition of the railway bridge just west of **Tempe** was the responsibility of Major C. Langbein with another section from 19 Army Troops Company. Explosives, as usual, were short, but Sapper Gordon came through the air raids with ammonal and gelignite from **Larisa** and at 8 p.m. the bridge was successfully wrecked.

By then reinforcements ² were on their way. At dusk Lieutenant-Colonel Chilton appeared, closely followed by 2/2 Australian Battalion, confident but tired after its long night marches ³ from **Veroia** to the mountains east of **Servia Pass**. Twenty-sixth Battery came through from **Elasson** about midnight and the following afternoon, 17 April, 2/3 Battalion appeared, slightly below strength because some lorry drivers had missed the turn-off at **Larisa** and continued with the main stream of traffic towards **Thermopylae**.

The earlier arrivals had already been hastening to select and prepare a line. ⁴ At 8.30 a.m. Chilton and Macky, together with Lieutenant-

¹ **Capt H. G. Rose; Auckland; born England, 7 Nov 1897; solicitor; wounded and p.w. 22 May 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.**

² **See pp. 252– 3.**

³ **See pp. 197– 8, 227.**

⁴ **See map facing p. 253.**

4 Field Regiment, Lieutenant Williams of A Troop 5 Field Regiment and Lieutenant K. A. Longmore of L Troop 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, had inspected the western half of the gorge as far as the road block covered by 10 Platoon B Company. Knowing that the Germans might appear at any moment, the commanders accepted the immediately available positions along a dangerously extended front.

To the west there lay the level open country south of the Pinios River. In the centre the road and railway from Larisa went through the villages of Makrikhori ¹ and Evangelismos, but just west of Tempe the railway bridged the river and continued eastwards along the north bank. The road followed the south bank between the river and the ridges of Mount Ossa. At the foot of the first ridge was Tempe, a collection of white houses with peach trees in the gardens and an ancient mosque beside the Greek Orthodox church.

Beyond it in the steep valley between the second and third ridges were vineyards and terraces of olive groves. And above them among oaks, elms and chestnut trees, Ambelakia overlooked the Pinios River and the lower slopes of Mount Olympus.

At the foot of the third ridge the gorge proper began and the road, cut from the mountainside and shaded by tall trees, was almost too

narrow for wheeled traffic. But it had always been the natural avenue for the invader; the ruins of old fortresses and old chapels were proof of that. The river was no longer 'clear as crystal glass over the gravelly stones' but it was still 'pleasant to behold for the grass upon the banks, and resounding again with the melodious concert of the birds.'² To the ancients the vale was an abode of the gods; in the spring of 1941 to the soldiers from the Antipodes it was a world of hyacinths and cyclamens, crocuses and anemones, below scarlet Judas trees and budding planes and chestnuts.

On 17 April it was more important to consider the possible movement of the enemy from the **Platamon** tunnel area. With the mountains and the sea cliffs making it virtually impossible for any movement down the coast, the attacks when they came would be through the gorge or over the southern ridges of **Mount Olympus**. And in spite of the majestic scenery neither route was impracticable. If the tanks crossed the river they could then follow the road along the south side of the gorge. If the infantry wished to cross the mountain there was a road, difficult but not impossible for motor traffic, from the coast to the mountain village of Rapsani and mule tracks from **Skotina** and **Pandeleimon** to Gonnos, a village from which the mountain troops could approach **Tempe** or begin an encirclement of the western flank.

¹ **Makrikhori** is the village, **Makrikhorion** the railway station.

² **Pliny**, translated by **Philemon Holland**.

The same weaknesses had been apparent to the Greeks when **Xerxes** moved south towards **Athens**. They had gone into position 'along the course of **Peneus**, having the range of **Olympus** on the one hand and **Ossa** upon the other.' After a few days they had withdrawn. 'In my opinion what chiefly wrought on them was the fear that the Persians might enter by another pass, thereof they now heard, which led from Upper **Macedonia** into **Thessaly** through the territory of the **Perrhaebi**,

and by the town of Gonnus—the pass by which soon afterwards the army of Xerxes actually made its entrance The Greeks, on their return to the Isthmus, took counsel ... and considered where they should fix the war, and what places they should occupy. The opinion which prevailed was, that they should guard the pass of **Thermopylae**; since it was narrower than the Thessalian defile, and at the same time nearer to them.’ ¹

Unlike the Greeks the British could not make a sudden withdrawal. **Allen Force** had orders to stand fast until 6 Brigade from **Elasson** and **Savige Force** from **Kalabaka** had passed through **Larisa**. **Chilton** and **Macky** therefore decided that 21 Battalion, from the high country on the south bank, must cover the gorge from the road block to **Tempe** village. The 2/2 Australian Battalion would occupy a position in depth at the entrance to the gorge. And because **Chilton** thought it probable that the Germans would attempt to turn the left flank, his battalion front had also to be extended westwards along the **Pinios River**.

The position of the anti-tank guns caused some discussion. **Macky** wanted them so deployed as to threaten the tanks when they emerged from the gorge, but in the end three of them were on the flats between the ridges of **Mount Ossa**. From there they could direct enfilade fire upon the tanks before they ever left the gorge. The fourth gun was placed in the area of C Company 2/2 Battalion to cover any possible movement from the gorge.

Chilton also decided that 2/2 Battalion would send a patrol back into the gorge to discover whether the crossing place at the north-east end had been seized. A picket would be sent to the high country east of **Evangelismos** and, once a ford could be found, a patrol would go over to the north side of the river. Twenty-first Battalion had left all its telephone cable at **Platamon**, but the Australians from their precious horde of Italian equipment brought over from **Libya** were able to link up the two headquarters.

By nightfall the units were in position. On the sharply defined ridges

above and beyond **Tempe** village were the companies of 21 Battalion. B Company (Major C. A. Le Lievre) was well

¹ *Herodotus*: Book VII, Chapters 173–5 (Rawlinson's translation).

forward and somewhat dispersed, 10 Platoon still covering the road block in the gorge, 11 Platoon (Lieutenant **Yeoman** ¹) patrolling forward from Ambelakia village to prevent any movement along the mountain tracks and 12 Platoon (Lieutenant **Finlayson** ²) with Company Headquarters on the more forward of the three ridges.

D Company (Captain A. C. Trousdale) in the high country east of Ambelakia overlooked the gorge and covered the right flank, round which mountain troops could possibly infiltrate. C Company (Captain W. M. Tongue) held the central sector, with 13 Platoon (Lieutenant M. C. O'Neill) on the flat across the road and 14 and 15 Platoons up the rocky ridge towards Ambelakia. A Company (Captain R. B. McClymont) was in reserve behind the third or western ridge, ready to meet an attack across the river or from the rear. No. 9 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant W. J. G. Roach) was on the lower slopes of the ridge looking into the gorge; 8 Platoon (Lieutenant **Bullock-Douglas** ³) was facing the river; and 7 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant W. J. Southworth) was west again on the flat facing the river and linking 21 Battalion with 2/2 Battalion.

In Tempe village itself was the RAP covered by details from Headquarters Company under Lieutenant **Anderson**. ⁴ The remainder were with A Company. Just south of the village and some 100 yards east of the road, Battalion Headquarters was located, with the carrier platoon beyond that again. As all signals equipment had been left at **Platamon** the only form of communication between companies was by runner.

The battalion was overlooked from the high country north of the river and its position was hazardous if enemy tanks pushed through into **Tempe** or if the infantry crossed the river and succeeded in driving back

the Australians. But the positions seemed the best in the circumstances. To support the anti-tank gunners and to halt any infantry moving forward with the tanks, the companies were sited low down the ridges.

The four guns of L Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery had been placed in position very carefully. In the early stages L1 was well forward covering the road block but too far in front of the infantry. At 6 p.m. it was, with Brigadier Allen's consent, brought back towards

¹ **Capt A. A. Yeoman**, m.i.d.; Katikati; born **Whakatane**, 24 Feb 1914; dairy farmer; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.

² **Capt R. C. B. Finlayson**; **Auckland**; born **Dunedin**, 8 Nov 1914; labourer; p.w. 25 Apr 1941.

³ **Capt G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas**; **Hawera**; born **Wanganui**, 4 Jun 1911; bank accountant; twice wounded.

⁴ **Lt H. R. Anderson**; born **Dargaville**, 24 Mar 1908; estate agent; killed in action 20 May 1941.

the village. Thereafter, the foremost gun was L4 (Sergeant **Cavanagh**¹), in the gully behind the C Company or central ridge and covering the road behind the demolition² which was made that evening by the Australian engineers. L1 (Sergeant **Quinn**³) was in the same gully, but in a position nearer the road and actually covering the new crater. L3 was farther back behind a bluff in the same gully, while L2 was in the 2/2 Battalion sector covering the railway bridge and the road out of **Tempe** village.

¹ **Sgt D. E. Cavanagh**; **Auckland**; born **Hamilton**, 15 May 1917; commercial traveller; wounded and p.w. 18 Apr 1941.

² See p. 323.

³ **Sgt A. Quinn; Te Awamutu; born NZ 3 May 1908; truck driver and mechanic; wounded 18 Apr 1941.**

TO GREECE

THE AUSTRALIAN POSITIONS

The Australian Positions

At 1 p.m. Brigadier Allen ⁴ arrived in the area and took command, establishing his headquarters at Makrihorion. He realised that to hold the wide front for any length of time there should have been twice as many troops and guns, but he also knew that the Germans were almost certain to attack the following morning. The best he could do was to make some slight adjustments in the Australian sector and to place the greater part of 2/3 Battalion, which was now arriving from the **Servia** sector, in positions to the rear at which the enemy could possibly be held until the brigades from the north and west had passed through **Larisa**.

The final arrangement saw C Company 2/2 Battalion with one New Zealand anti-tank gun astride the road on the flat just west of **Tempe**. South of it was A Company (less a platoon) protecting the approaches to Evangelismos; B Company (less a platoon) and Battalion Headquarters were south of that village. The two ⁵ platoons from the companies had been sent to occupy Hill 1005 just south of Ambelakia.

On the extreme left flank, at the suggestion of the Brigadier, D Company was sent to Point 156, the hill feature overlooking the river between **Makrihori** and Parapotamos. This reduced the danger of an encircling movement from the west, but left a 3000- yard gap in the FDLs which was covered by the Bren carriers and a patrol, one platoon strong, from D Company. The gap was wide but there was little cover in the flat fields of spring wheat. Nevertheless, it was through this gap that the enemy was to achieve his early success.

Finally, three guns from 2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment were sited in the area, one with A Company, one in Evangelismos and another with B Company to the south of that village. The guns might have been

more useful in the restricted area of the gorge but they had arrived late and some depth in the defence was thought necessary.

In the afternoon 2/3 Battalion arrived. C Company was sent to the left flank to an area west of and overlooking D Company 2/2 Battalion. B and D Companies were placed in reserve astride the highway north and south of Makrihorion, about four miles south of the rear company of 2/2 Battalion. A Company was sent to patrol the mountain tracks from the east and south-east through Sikourion and Ayia.

⁴ **Allen Force:** 2/2 and 2/3 Aust Bns, 21 NZ Bn, 26 Bty 4 NZ Fd Regt, A Tp 5 NZ Fd Regt, L Tp 7 NZ A-Tk Regt, three guns 2/1 Aust A-Tk Regt, seven carriers 2/5 Aust Bn and four carriers 2/11 Aust Bn.

⁵ One platoon was withdrawn when it was evident that the Germans were attacking across the river on the Australian front.

TO GREECE

THE SUPPORTING ARTILLERY

The Supporting Artillery

A Troop 5 Field Regiment, which had supported 21 Battalion in the tunnel area, was now under the command of Major G. J. O. Stewart, who had arrived from the **Elasson** area with 26 Battery 4 Field Regiment. The guns had been dug in and camouflaged among the trees and bushes of the fields to the west of the road south of Evangelismos. From there they could shell the road blocks in the gorge and any movements across the Pinios River. One change was afterwards made. On the night of 17–18 April two guns were moved forward and given an anti-tank role: one from 26 Battery to the west of the road and just south of the village; the other, from A Troop 5 Field Regiment, to the east of the road. The observation post for D Troop (Captain **Nolan**¹) was on the ridge above C Company 21 Battalion; that for E Troop (Captain **Bliss**²) in the A Company area south of **Tempe**; and that for F Troop (Captain **Richardson**³) in the D Company 2/2 Battalion area near **Makrikhori**. To the south of Evangelismos Major Stewart had his headquarters in the B Company 2/2 Battalion area; Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson, who had left his Regimental Headquarters in the **Elasson** area, was with Headquarters 2/2 Battalion.

¹ **Capt S. T. Nolan**, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born **Onehunga**, 14 Aug 1905; motor trimmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² **Maj H. C. Bliss**, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 22 Sep 1914; dairy farmer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³ **Capt J. Richardson**, ED; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 26 Jan 1913; salesman; wounded and p.w. 23 Nov 1941; repatriated Apr 1943.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS ENTER THE PINIOS GORGE, AFTERNOON 17 APRIL

The Germans enter the Pinios Gorge, Afternoon 17 April

On 15 April when *Battle Group 2* of *XVIII Corps* was approaching the **Platamon** tunnel, *6 Mountain Division* which had been preparing ⁴ to attack in the **Veroia** area was diverted south to give

⁴ See p. 245.

its support. Next day its commander, General F. Schoerner, was warned that he must be prepared to make an encircling movement across the southern slopes of **Mount Olympus** to the village of Gonnos, close by the western entrance to the **Pinios Gorge**. Without waiting for any further orders, he had sent his advanced guard over the ridges above the **Platamon** tunnel and to the rear of 21 Battalion. Thus on the afternoon of 17 April, when **Allen Force** was preparing to defend the western entrance to the gorge, *Battle Group 2* was already in the gorge and *6 Mountain Division* was descending the mountain tracks towards Gonnos.

In the gorge the enemy was approaching by way of the railway line on the north bank. The cycle squadron of *112 Reconnaissance Unit*—on foot—led the way, but about 5 p.m. it was halted at the second tunnel—‘even the engineers could do no good, so thoroughly had the English carried out their demolitions.’ Thereafter the men attempted to clamber round the steep, exposed hillsides. That was not without its dangers for 10 Platoon B Company at the forward road block immediately opened fire. The Germans set up a mortar and a machine gun, but after Privates **McCabe** ¹ and **Clark** ² had climbed to higher ground and directed the counter fire they were forced to take shelter in the tunnel.

At this stage the leading tank of *1/3 Panzer Regiment* appeared and

the battalion commander 'took this squadron under his command' because of the 'determined resistance in the gorge.'³ The fire from the tank eventually forced 10 Platoon to find better cover some 200 yards up the ridges. The New Zealand artillery had been asked to give its support and an armoured car had been sent to observe, but the depth of the gorge and the succession of ridges had made it impossible to use the wireless sets. The telephone at the observation post in the A Company area was eventually used, but it was then 7.30 p.m. and the engagement had become more complicated.

The reports are confused, but the Germans seem to have opened fire not only on the New Zealanders but upon the platoon from 2/2 Battalion which was moving in to report upon German movements through the gorge. Unaware of the enemy about the tunnel, the Australians suffered severe casualties before they could take cover and conduct, simultaneously with 10 Platoon, a small-arms engagement which lasted until they withdrew after dusk.

Shortly afterwards 10 Platoon was recalled by Lieutenant-Colonel

¹ **Sgt C. A. McCabe**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born NZ 31 Jan 1908; clerk; twice wounded; p.w. Nov 1941.

² **L-Cpl C. W. Clark**, m.i.d.; Edgecombe, Bay of Plenty; born **Timaru**, 18 Jan 1915; blacksmith; p.w. 1Jul 1941; escaped 10 Jul 1941; recaptured 26 Oct 1941.

³ Battle report by *1/3 Panzer Regiment*, 15–19 April 1941.

Macky, the men having been three days without rest and the other demolition having been blown outside **Tempe**. With two Australian wounded whom they had recovered the men returned, some to Battalion Headquarters, others to the B Company area. By then the artillery had opened fire and checked any other efforts to infiltrate beyond the tunnel.

The important point, however, is whether a stronger force should not have been sent to cover the road block. The gorge was narrow, cliffs overlooked the road and any additional troops in the area would have been just as vulnerable as the two platoons. Even so, the road opposite 10 Platoon was the best position for an effective road block and determined soldiers in prepared positions and supported by artillery fire might have delayed the clearing of the track and the dramatic approach next morning of the German tanks.

But farther back in the gorge the Germans had been incredibly successful. Unobserved by any New Zealanders, they had discovered a ford by which tanks could cross to the south bank. 'A Mk II tank drove determinedly down the high steep embankment into the water. It struggled through the river like a walrus, with nothing showing except its turret; it appeared to be swimming. But the driver carried on calmly, although he was sitting up to his middle in water and the waves completely prevented him from seeing anything. Finally the tank climbed out on the other side amid loud cheers from the spectators and pushed on forward.' Other tanks followed, two missing the exact crossing and sinking helplessly with no possibility of salvage. But five ¹ in all crossed and moved forward to the demolition, where ' 3 tanks stuck in a bog trying to bypass this in the water.' ² Night had then fallen so the tanks, screened by the mountain troops, laagered for the night.

¹ Battle report of *I/3 Panzer Regiment* says 1 Company had 'about 4 tanks across'.

² Battle report by *I/3 Panzer Regiment*, 15–19 April 1941.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS CROSS THE MOUNTAIN TO GONNOS, 17 APRIL

The Germans cross the Mountain to Gonnos, 17 April

North of the gorge *6 Mountain Division*, using the high mountain tracks through **Skotina** and Kallipevki, had been moving towards Gonnos. In his orders General Schoerner had described this as the most difficult task the division had ever had. All officers were instructed 'to throw themselves heart and soul into making the task a success' and, if necessary, 'to act with the utmost severity.'³ Food would be dropped by aircraft and every means would be used to bring up supplies, but the problem would never really be solved until the Germans took **Larisa**. As it happened, food was sometimes acquired on the way, and in one village the inhabitants were ordered to bake bread for the troops.

The advanced guard from *143 Mountain Regiment* and *1/118 Artillery Regiment* reached Gonnos about noon on 17 April. Some what to their surprise they had approached the village without any opposition. From there the force had to make the first moves to break the defences, occupy **Larisa** and cut the Allied line of withdrawal from the north and west. That night the General issued his orders for an attack across the river on 18 April.

³ *6 Mountain Division* war diary.

TO GREECE

ALLEN FORCE COMPLETES ITS DEFENCES, NIGHT 17-18 APRIL

Allen Force completes its Defences, Night 17-18 April

Across the river **Allen Force** was attempting to improve its defences. The platoons of 21 Battalion on the rocky ridges and the Australians on the flat were all digging slit trenches or erecting stone shelters. In the late afternoon the senior commanders had decided to move the Australian anti-tank guns farther forward, to use two of the 25-pounders in an anti-tank role and to crater the road at a point where it could be covered by artillery fire. The moves were made and that evening 2/1 Australian Field Company, using naval depth-charges, blew ¹ a shallow crater forward of **Tempe** below the central spur held by 21 Battalion. A minefield or an anti-tank ditch from there to the river would have been better but the engineers had neither the time nor the equipment for such a task.

The Germans with their pack animals were already descending the ridges south of **Mount Olympus**. An Australian patrol which had secured a punt was therefore sent over after dark to investigate. It reported that the enemy was already in Gonnos, that some detachments were moving west towards Elia and that the men left guarding the punt had successfully driven off a German patrol.

The gunners were active all through the night. They opened fire when lights were seen moving on the hills above Gonnos and, at regular intervals between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m., they shelled the areas about the tunnel and the road block. In the narrow gorge the detonations echoed viciously, the Germans afterwards reporting that the shells 'crashed in quick succession in the tank laager. Branches and stones fell from the hillsides. Everybody jumped for cover behind, under and in the tanks to escape the splinters. Here and there a man who had not escaped cried for help The MO had a lot of work to do, for there were dead and wounded on both sides of the Pinios.' ² In this one action *I/3 Panzer*

Regiment and the covering patrols from 8/800 Brandenburg Regiment had three killed and seventeen wounded. ³

¹ See p. 319.

² Report by *3 Panzer Division*.

³ Report by *I/3 Panzer Division*.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS FORCE THE GORGE, 18 APRIL

The Germans force the Gorge, 18 April

Next morning, 18 April, was bright and clear. Across the river parties of Germans could be seen moving down the tracks towards Gonnos and Itia. In the gorge detachments from *112 Reconnaissance Unit* were making another attempt to scramble round the often precipitous north bank. There was aimed rifle fire, but otherwise there was 'less opposition than the day before' until opposite the valley between B and C Companies 21 Battalion. Here the Germans halted for some hours, worried by 'heavy enfilade fire from MGs, mortars and artillery'¹ but successfully disturbing with their own weapons the positions on the open ridges occupied by 21 Battalion.

The result was that both the artillery and 21 Battalion gave their undivided attention to these troops and to the groups moving in and about Gonnos. The armoured detachment already on the south bank was unseen and undisturbed. The view of the men of 10 Platoon and Headquarters B Company, the closest to the gorge, was blocked by high ridges; 11 Platoon was too high up the mountain face to report any crossing; no artillery OP covered the road block; and no patrol from 21 Battalion had been sent forward to observe the tunnel area.

No. 7 Company 304 Regiment was therefore free to cross the river on kapok floats. Two platoons hastened to repair the demolitions which were blocking the tanks; the third prepared to meet counter-attacks, an unnecessary task as the unit report duly recorded. Then about midday when the road was clear, six tanks moved forward supported by two² platoons from *7/304 Regiment* and two patrols from *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment*.

The fact that the enemy had been able to clear the road block unobserved by the infantry and undisturbed by 26 Battery is one of the

main causes of failure in this action. If the shellfire of the previous night had been repeated the clearance of the road block would have been delayed and the advance of the tanks towards **Tempe** would not have been one of the deciding features of the action. ³

¹ *112 Reconnaissance Unit* report.

² Possibly one—the records are ambiguous.

³ Macky afterwards said: ‘The major mistake at Pinios was the siting of the road block in the gorge. The defending platoon became defiladed. The block was rendered unobserved when this platoon had to be withdrawn The effort to put the block under observation was the reason for the Australian engineers’ effort to blow at the end of the spur near **Tempe** where the road crept round it ... realising the vital necessity for this block once we had lost the observation of the gorge block I went down to Brig Allen and he agreed to get his engineers to blow the road at the spur. ‘This should be clearly understood: had we created an effective block which could be held under observation and preferably by artillery then the tanks would never have got out of the gorge. This we could and should have done but all efforts to retrieve our mistake were fruitless.’

The tanks were first seen by 12 Platoon, the forward element of B Company, which had throughout the morning been engaging the enemy across the river. About 12.15 p.m., when enemy fire from across the river had been intensified, ‘at least 6 enemy tanks came through the mouth of the gorge’ ¹ and rolled on below the company. It might have been possible for the men to scramble back to the other ridges but Major Le Lievre moved his company up the ridge towards Ambelakia.

He was acting on instructions. The movement of the enemy towards the river bank in the Australian sector had already convinced Lieutenant-Colonel Macky that a serious attack was developing to the left rear of his battalion. Late that morning he had called a conference

of his company commanders, explained the situation and told them that 'if completely cut off and overwhelmed those left would make out in small parties to Volos.'² As there was no system of communication each commander would have to act on his own initiative, though Captain Trousdale was advised that two green Very lights would mean the withdrawal of his D Company to the flat in the rear of Headquarters Company area. It was desperate advice at this early stage, particularly when Brigadier Clowes on 16 April had suggested that if the enemy broke through the gorge the battalion was 'to fall back to a position astride the point where the road and railway crossed, seven miles south of the western exit.'³ On the other hand, it is extremely doubtful if the companies could by nightfall have crossed the hills to this assembly point.

As it was, 11 Platoon in the high country to the north-east never received the orders to withdraw. All through the morning the men watched the tanks moving through the gorge below them, and when the force appeared to be approaching Tempe Second-Lieutenant Yeoman made inquiries at Headquarters B Company. Astonished to find that it had already withdrawn, he collected his forward sections which were resisting the screen of German infantry and, after some anxious moments, withdrew to the hills above Ambelakia.

By that time C Company (Captain Tongue), on the ridge running up to Ambelakia, had been dispersed by the advancing tanks. No. 13 Platoon (Lieutenant O'Neill) on the flat between the road and the river had learnt of their approach when Captain Nolan, the artillery observer, called down, 'Infanteers, the

¹ Lt Finlayson, 21 Battalion.

² Lt-Col Macky, report on 21 Battalion in Greece. Macky had seen the NZ Division Operation Order No. 3 which stated that the Division would 'withdraw to the Volos area as a preliminary to the subsequent withdrawal to the Thermopylae Line.'

tanks are coming.' Very shortly afterwards the tanks had edged forward to the foot of the ridge, where they waited for nearly two hours, firing at the men climbing up towards Ambelakia and being shelled in turn by 26 Battery under Nolan's direction. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons were forced up the ridge but 13 Platoon, in its shallow weapon pits about 100 yards from the tanks, was trapped. About 2 p.m. when the tanks, hitherto 'very cagy about sticking their necks out', ¹ at last moved on towards **Tempe** and the supporting enemy infantry came over the ridge, the platoon had to surrender. A slight rise in the road, the hesitancy of the Germans to come over the crest, and the shelter of the shallow weapon pits had limited the casualties to one killed and two wounded.

The tanks then moved very cautiously round the butt of the C Company ridge and into the area covered by the guns of L Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery. Much depended upon them and their history must be studied gun by gun. L1, which had been placed to cover the demolition at the foot of the ridge, was probably silenced by machine-gun fire. The battle report of *1/3 Panzer Regiment* states that the anti-tank gun 50 metres beyond the road block had been kept quiet by machine-gun fire from the north-east of Itia.

The second gun (Sergeant Cavanagh and crew) was not brought into action too hastily. The first tank crossed the demolition but Cavanagh, only 100 yards away and wanting as many targets as possible, waited until the second had got through. The tank crews, surprisingly confident, got out and waited for the third tank to appear. When it came up they returned to their tanks. L4 was then brought into action. Twenty-eight shells were fired in quick succession, setting two tanks on fire and, it was thought, crippling the third.

The German account, however, states that 'The two leading tanks ... now advanced to attack the village of **Tempe** but both were hit by A Tk fire and knocked out ... 3 killed, 6 wounded. The anti-tank gun (which

was very cleverly sited) was put out of action by *7/304 Regiment....*²

This was probably correct for the men from that unit and the patrols from *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment* had been advancing over the ridges, supported by fire from the tanks and from *112 Reconnaissance Regiment* across the river. They sent in no reports of any opposition but they did mention that 'about 80 PW were winkled out from the hills.' So it was probably they who appeared over the ridge once held by C Company and called upon the anti-tank gunners to surrender. Preferring to risk an attempt to get to

¹ Lt O'Neill, 21 Battalion.

² Reports of *3 Panzer Regiment*, *1/3 Panzer Regiment*, *II/304 Infantry Regiment*.

a gun quad which was parked nearby behind a stone wall, the gunners dashed back ¹ and eventually came out through **Tempe** to the lines of C Company 2/2 Battalion.

The other two guns, L3 and L2, have no tanks to their credit; in fact little is known of their crews and their work. The gunners with L3 may have put up a stout resistance for the citation for a Knight's Cross won by an officer of *7/304 Infantry Regiment* who was working with the tanks states that 'he personally destroyed with hand grenades an A Tk position which fought to the last....'² Nothing definite is known about the history of L2 in the Australian area. According to C Company 2/2 Battalion, the crew removed the breech block of the gun and withdrew.³

The artillery observers who had seen a good deal of the engagement both managed to get back to their unit. Captain Bliss on the A Company ridge was back in the gun lines by 4 p.m. Captain Nolan, farther forward on the C Company ridge, had spent the early afternoon directing fire on the tanks. He had seen Sergeant Cavanagh's gun crew halt the tanks and then about 2 p.m., when members of 21 Battalion were withdrawing

up the ridge, he had crawled to his vehicle and driven back under fire to the outskirts of **Tempe**. The road being blocked, he had jumped out and hastened back to safety.

At this stage, about 2 p.m., the future movements of 21 Battalion seem to have been decided. The German infantry could be seen across the river and approaching the Australian positions; the tanks, now unopposed, would soon be able to fan out into the open country west of **Tempe**. This would mean the overrunning of A Company 21 Battalion and C Company 2/2 Battalion, a thrust south-west-wards towards **Larisa** and the isolation of B, C and D Companies now climbing up the ridges to **Ambelakia**. So when Captain McClymont went up to Battalion Headquarters on 'top of the ridge behind' its original position, he was told that A Company after delaying the enemy as long as possible would move up the ridge and cover the withdrawal of the battalion towards **Volos**. Lieutenant Smith was sent to select platoon positions; McClymont returned to his company.

The Germans took some time, however, to get clear of the gorge and the task commander, cautious after his losses, did not occupy **Tempe** until 3 p.m. And *112 Reconnaissance Unit*, which was scrambling along the north side of the river—as well as troubling 21 Battalion—did not reach the village until 3.30 p.m. and the blown railway bridge until 4.45 p.m.

¹ They were unfortunate enough to be captured that night, probably at the road block outside **Larisa**. See pp. 340–2.

² Perhaps this refers to Cavanagh's anti-tank gun.

³ See p. 332.

A Company and the detachment in **Tempe** had by then dispersed. No. 7 Platoon (Lieutenant Southworth) on the river flat had been able to

withdraw westwards and join 2/2 Battalion. Those with Lieutenant Roach went up the ridge, joined the battalion and were eventually evacuated; others joined Lieutenant Smith and with him, 'by foot, boat, truck and train', reached the toe of Greece only to be taken prisoner. ¹ The adjutant, Captain Dutton, who had been at Battalion Headquarters attempting to direct artillery fire upon the approaching tanks, had moved back round the lower slopes collecting men from Headquarters and A Companies and eventually coming out on the flat behind the Australian reserve at Evangelismos. Here he joined the medical officer, Captain Hetherington, ² and the group—about 150 all ranks—was eventually directed by Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson to the area behind 26 Battery where Major Harding was waiting with motor transport.

The fact that trucks were there at all justifies some explanation for the incident is typical of the swiftly changing front. At an Anzac Corps conference Harding had been told that the battalion transport must be sent back to Thermopylae; other trucks would go forward for the battalion. But the orders were changed and Harding himself had to arrange transport for the withdrawal. He sent the trucks back, the loads were dumped and an attempt made to return for the battalion. But the movement was halted because all roads were being kept clear for southbound traffic. Harding was then instructed by Corps Headquarters to explain his problem to Divisional Headquarters. Twenty trucks from A Section 4 RMT Company and two from C Section were allocated to him and by 5 p.m. were dispersed south of D Troop 26 Battery. Shortly afterwards General Freyberg came through from Headquarters Allen Force with the news that the battalion had been dispersed. However, the group brought in by Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson eventually appeared and by about 7 p.m. other parties had come through, making the total about 200 all ranks—Australians and New Zealanders. With Captain Sadler ³ in command, the convoy set out along the road to Larisa. Harding, who remained with two trucks to collect any late arrivals, came out ⁴ about 9 p.m. behind 2/3 Australian Battalion.

The rest of the battalion was scattered along the ridges about

Ambelakia. Two B Company platoons had come back through D Company; the other with Lieutenant Yeoman was coming in from

¹ See p. 344.

² **Capt O. S. Hetherington, MBE; Rotorua; born Thames, 3 Apr 1903; medical practitioner; RMO 21 Bn Jan 1940–May 1941; p.w. 23 May 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.**

³ **Maj F. A. Sadler; Auckland; born Dunedin, 11 Feb 1902; clerk; wounded 27 May 1941.**

⁴ See p. 343.

the eastern flank. C Company had climbed up its ridge through D Company, which in turn had moved off about 1 p.m. after two green Very lights had been fired from Battalion Headquarters. Another group, eight officers and about thirty other ranks, had climbed up from headquarters with Lieutenant-Colonel Macky. Thus by nightfall all these parties, by different routes, were moving towards the coast and the port of Volos.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS CROSS THE PINIOS RIVER ON THE AUSTRALIAN FRONT, 18 APRIL

The Germans cross the Pinios River on the Australian front, 18 April

On the night of 17–18 April the German force assembling across the river—143 *Mountain Regiment*, less *II Battalion*, and supported by twelve 7.5-centimetre artillery guns from *I/118 Mountain Artillery Regiment*—had received its orders. The English ‘apparently 2 Companies strong’ and ‘without artillery’ seemed to ‘intend to resist’, so at 7 a.m. *I/143 Mountain Regiment* would make a feint attack, mainly by fire, on the ‘**Tempe-Parapotamos line**’, the Australian right flank. Half an hour later *III/143 Mountain Regiment* would cross the river and encircle the Australian left flank, west of Parapotamos. And to complete the encirclement of Allen Force *2 Company*¹ of the regiment would, early that morning, cross the river still higher up, move west of the hills adjoining Makrikhori and attempt to cut the road to the north of **Larisa**.

At 9 a.m. *I/143 Regiment* made the first move—the feint attack into the river bend east of Parapotamos—which brought heavy fire from the Australian machine guns and mortars and several concentrations from the New Zealand artillery. Nevertheless, by 12.30 p.m. the Germans were assembling opposite Evangelismos and under fire from D Company *2/2 Battalion* about Point 156.

To the west of Parapotamos a dawn patrol from *III/143 Regiment* had found a boat and crossed without any opposition. All through the morning the battalion progressed, advancing south-eastwards and forcing ‘the English (who were in the act of taking up positions immediately S.E. of Parapotamos) to withdraw.’²

As it happened, D Company *2/2 Battalion* had watched the German files moving down from Gonnos but had not been able to observe their river-crossing. At 9 a.m., however, when grey-clad figures were seen

moving out of the village, a patrol was sent to investigate, but outside the village it came under fire and withdrew. Bren carriers were then sent out to check the movement, but they too came under fire from German mortars and there were several casualties.

¹ *2 Company I/143 Mountain Regiment* and the engineer platoon of *5 Company*. See pp. 340–3.

² *III/143 Mountain Regiment* report on crossing of Pinios River, 18 April 1941.

The artillerymen were able, however, to give some supporting fire. The infantry officers over their line circuit sent back directions to the guns until Lieutenant **Clark**¹ of 5 New Zealand Field Regiment arrived at Headquarters D Company. For the rest of the morning he directed the fire of D Troop² upon any Germans moving about the flats south of Gonnos. Thereafter *III/143 Mountain Regiment* was content to complete its crossing and to develop an encircling movement round the left flank, where D Company 2/2 Battalion about Point 156 and C Company 2/3 Battalion to the south were attempting, with little or no equipment, to create a line.

The right flank, adjoining **Tempe** and the 21 Battalion sector, had seen less direct action. C Company 2/2 Battalion had observed and engaged at long range the many groups approaching the river. The 21 Battalion carriers (Lieutenant **Dee**³) to the south-east of the demolished railway bridge and the Australian carriers, to the left and closer to the river, had been worrying any Germans approaching the bank. Still farther to the left, A Company 2/2 Battalion had been harassing any parties moving from Gonnos towards the river bank, and the 3-inch mortar platoon by using exceptionally heavy charges was engaging the enemy at 2000 yards. The Germans in this sector were not, however, attempting to cross the river. They were making a feint attack to cover the more serious movement on their right flank. In this they were

successful for about 11 a.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Chilton asked Lieutenant-Colonel Macky for the use of 21 Battalion Bren carriers to repulse the expected attack between A and B Companies 2/2 Battalion. It never developed, but because Macky had no means of communicating with his carriers they were, for the remainder of the action, under Australian command.

¹ **Capt J. S. Clark; Auckland; born Glasgow, 27 Aug 1917; bank clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

² **D Troop was also shelling targets for Captain Nolan, whose OP was above C Company 21 Battalion.**

³ **Capt K. G. Dee; born Onehunga, 6 Apr 1914; farmer; wounded 4 Jul 1942; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.**

TO GREECE

ALLEN FORCE IS THREATENED WITH ENCIRCLEMENT

Allen Force is Threatened with Encirclement

In the afternoon the situation along the Australian front rapidly changed for the worse. On the extreme left, D Company 2/2 Battalion about Point 156 maintained its position but by 4 p.m., the last time the telephone line was usable, the report to headquarters was that the enemy was relentlessly moving round and digging in south-west of Parapotamos. The patrolling platoon was therefore withdrawn from the river bank and orders were issued for a counter-attack supported by Bren carriers.

But this did not eventuate. Written orders were received stating that B Company 2/3 Battalion in the rear was 'now withdrawing' and that C Company of the same unit should co-ordinate its withdrawal with that of the adjoining D Company 2/2 Battalion. The order was unexpected but by 4.45 p.m. the two companies, covered by the Bren carriers, were marching back to **Makrikhori**. From there they were transported to the Makrikhorion area to join Brigade Headquarters and the other companies of 2/3 Battalion.

Neither the orders nor the withdrawal had been known to Lieutenant-Colonel Chilton of 2/2 Battalion. When the noise of firing had ceased on his left flank he concluded that the companies had been overrun. Actually there had been a misunderstanding. After the visit ¹ and the issue of withdrawal orders by **General Freyberg**, Brigadier Allen had instructed Lieutenant-Colonel D. J. Lamb of 2/3 Battalion to prepare a rearguard position astride the road about two miles south of Makrikhorion. And Lamb's intention had been that his C Company should move out whenever D Company 2/2 Battalion had withdrawn. As it was, the company commanders, misinterpreting the order, had decided that their units were to move back together—and immediately.

The left flank was now wide open but the companies, if they had remained any longer, would soon have been encircled. In the central sector the German commander, anxious because of the slow movement through the gorge, had become more aggressive. About midday *1/143 Mountain Regiment*, hitherto staging the feint attack upon Evangelismos, was ordered to 'cross with all available means at **Tempe** and open the way out of the gorge for 2 Pz Div.'² Patrols had already found that the river could be waded to the west of the village and 'the ever increasing noise of fighting from the gorge' suggested that 'the Pz division was making another attempt to break through.'³ So about 1 p.m. the crossing was under way and in an hour and a half, in spite of 'terrific defensive fire', the companies were over the swift-flowing river—about seventy feet wide and five feet deep.

They had been harassed by the Bren-gunners of A and B Companies 2/2 Battalion; the two 3-inch mortars with A Company had dropped 350 bombs among the rafts and along the mud banks; and the guns of E and F Troops 4 New Zealand Field Regiment had given their support. As seen by Captain Bliss, who was directing the fire of E Troop, the Germans had 'formed up in what seemed like platoons in line and three or four platoons advanced ... with thirty to forty yard intervals. Rds of gun fire were falling among

¹ See p. 333.

² *21/143 Mountain Regiment* report on attack over Pinios, 18 April 1941.

³ *Ibid.*

them continuously but did not affect the speed of the advance or check it. The inf. advanced to the river ... and there waded across on foot. They lay concealed in the scrub on the southern bank of the river'¹ The companies were immediately reorganised and sent south-

eastwards across the open country towards Evangelismos.

By then it was 3 p.m. and *Battle Group 2* was emerging from the gorge. The supporting infantry had appeared over the ridges once occupied by 21 Battalion and the tanks, cautiously moving out of **Tempe**, had approached the positions of C Company 2/2 Battalion. The New Zealand anti-tank crew in that area had already departed,² so when the only Australian anti-tank gun was disabled, the infantry were in an impossible position. The forward platoon was overwhelmed and the others forced up the ridges on the eastern side of the road.

The Bren carriers of 2/7 and 2/11 Battalions, together with several from 21 Battalion, did their best from hull-down positions astride the road and railway to cover the withdrawal of the infantry. In one 21 Battalion carrier WO II **Lockett**³ engaged a tank and forced it off the highway, but the halt could only be temporary. The carriers pulled back, leaving the tanks free to turn southwards along the road to Evangelismos.

The stage was thus set for a fighting withdrawal to prevent the Germans from entering **Larisa** before 6 Brigade had withdrawn from **Elasson** and **Savige Force** from the Zarkos area.

¹ HQ NZ Divisional Artillery report, Appx E.

² See p. 327.

³ WO II **A. H. Lockett**, MM; born **Gisborne**, 5 Jan 1905; student; killed in action 27 May 1941.

TO GREECE

THE ORDERS FOR WITHDRAWAL

The Orders for Withdrawal

In the original orders ⁴ of the New Zealand Division on 16 April 21 Battalion and other units in the **Pinios Gorge** were to disengage and move back by motor transport during the night of 18–19 April. Next day, when Brigadier Allen was instructed to prevent the occupation of **Larisa** from the east, no definite time seems to have been given for the withdrawal. The movements of **Allen Force** and the New Zealand Division to **Larisa** and eastwards through **Volos** were the responsibility of **General Freyberg**.

The first instructions from Headquarters New Zealand Division were given in a signal ⁵ timed 12.40 p.m., 18 April. As 6 Brigade in its withdrawal ⁶ from **Elasson** had to clear **Larisa** before Allen Force, the Brigadier had to hold, until 3 a.m. on 19 April, a line running north-west to south-east through the junction of the **Tempe- Sikourion** roads. His force could thin out earlier, but the roads through **Larisa** were reserved for 6 Brigade until 1 a.m., 19 April. The New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment was sending over a squadron from **Elasson** to assist in the withdrawal; it would remain under the Brigadier's control until it was south of **Larisa**. Thereafter the movement of **Allen Force** through **Volos** to the **Thermopylae** line would be covered by the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry.

The orders were taken forward to Headquarters **Allen Force** by a liaison officer who arrived in the mid-afternoon. Lieutenant- Colonel Chilton of 2/2 Battalion had line communication with Brigade Headquarters so he was swiftly given an outline plan of the withdrawal. Movement would not begin until 3 a.m., 19 April, though 'it was hoped to get the time put forward.' ¹

Soon afterwards **General Freyberg**, who had received disturbing

reports about the situation, appeared at Brigade Headquarters and spoke over the telephone to Chilton. It was impossible to get a message through to 21 Battalion, which had been forced up the ridge towards Ambelakia. The General then went forward, studied the situation for himself and decided that the proposed line could not be held until midnight. To delay the enemy **Allen Force** would have to conduct a fighting withdrawal towards **Larisa**. Sixth New Zealand Brigade and **Savage Force**, which would be coming south that night, would thus be given time to move through towards **Volos** and **Thermopylae**.

The necessary orders were prepared, confirming the general plan of withdrawal but ordering the forward units to break contact at dusk. As line communications had broken down shortly after the General's departure, an officer was sent forward in a Bren carrier to deliver the orders to Chilton and Parkinson. Moving up against the stream of men and vehicles, he reached the forward artillery area only to be told, incorrectly, that Chilton's headquarters had been overrun by the German tanks. He left the orders for Parkinson with Captain **Thornton**² of 26 New Zealand Battery and, seeing men on the eastern slopes, went across hoping to find Chilton. In this he was unsuccessful; Battalion Headquarters and B Company 2/2 Battalion were still in action about Evangelismos—and were so until about 6.45 p.m.

Finally, about 6 p.m. Headquarters 16 Brigade moved back from Makrihorion to the crossroads where Lieutenant-Colonel Lamb and 2/3 Battalion were endeavouring to build up another line.

⁴ See p. 228. Macky's copy of this order had an uncorrected error, giving the time of withdrawal for 21 Battalion as the night 17–18 April instead of night 18–19 April.

⁵ NZ Division to **Allen Force**, 18 April.

⁶ See pp. 303– 8.

¹ **Report on the operations of 2/2 Australian Infantry Battalion at Pinios Gorge.**

² **Brig L. W. Thornton, CBE, m.i.d.; Bangkok; born Christchurch, 15 Oct 1916; Regular soldier; BM 6 Bde Feb–Sep 1942; GSO II 2 NZ Div Oct 1942–Jun 1943; CO 5 Fd Regt Jun–Dec 1943, Apr–Jun 1944; GSO I 2 NZ Div 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div 1945; DCGS Apr 1948–Jan 1949; QMG, Army HQ, 1955–56; Adjutant-General Mar 1956–Jun 1958 Chief of SEATO Military Planning Office.**

TO GREECE

THE ARTILLERY PREPARES TO COVER THE WITHDRAWAL

The Artillery prepares to Cover the Withdrawal

The artillery units with **Allen Force** had now to prepare for a series of rearguard actions. In the morning there had been sixteen ¹ 25-pounders, but after midday three guns from A Troop 5 Field Regiment had been sent back to **Larisa**, two of them with faulty tell-tale valves. One from F Troop 4 Field Regiment and one from A Troop 5 Field Regiment were in anti-tank positions near Evangelismos and the other eleven had been giving supporting fire across the six-mile front.

In the early afternoon the artillerymen were well aware of the changing front. Stragglers had reported that 21 Battalion was pulling back, in the central sector Germans could be seen to have crossed the river and from the west reports had come in of the enemy about Parapotamos. Every effort had been made to halt these movements but the targets had been too numerous for the limited number of guns, and now that the front was disintegrating it was difficult to get accurate information. By 2 p.m. the only observation post functioning was that of Captain Bliss on the ridge of A Company 21 Battalion and the signals from him were becoming increasingly faint. The shelling of the river crossings was then directed by Lieutenant **Hanna**, ² who had scaled a tree at the command post. The same officer, when news came through of the tanks entering **Tempe**, suggested that the guns should be moved to positions better suited for anti-tank warfare, but permission was refused.

Shortly afterwards, however, probably because of Hanna's representations, D Troop 4 Field Regiment was recalled by Lieutenant Carson, ³ the acting ⁴ command post officer. As it was moving back through the other two troops, Stukas bombed the guns and caused much confusion and delay but no casualties. At the end of the raid Major Stewart, on orders from Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson, instructed Clark

to place his troop in a rearguard position. On the way Clark met Brigadier Allen, explained his task and was left to select the positions for himself. The guns were eventually in position east of the road and behind Point 214, a good observation point.

The other troops, E and F, remained in their original positions to oppose the German advance towards Evangelismos and to cover the inevitable withdrawal.

¹ 26 Battery 4 NZ Field Regiment and A Troop 5 Field Regiment.

² Lt-Col G. P. Hanna, OBE, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 21 Apr 1916; solicitor; BM 2 NZ Div Arty May–Nov 1942; GSO II 2 NZ Div Nov 1943–Jun 1944, Oct 1944–Feb 1945; GSO I (Ops) NZ Corps 9 Feb–27 Mar 1944; CO 5 Fd Regt May–Sep 1945.

³ Maj W. N. Carson, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 16 Jul 1916; warehouseman; died of wounds 8 Oct 1944.

⁴ Lieutenant Clark, the troop commander, returned from the left flank just as the troop was moving out. See p. 330.

TO GREECE

THE REARGUARD ACTION IN THE LATE AFTERNOON, 18 APRIL

The Rearguard Action in the late afternoon, 18 April

After the occupation of **Tempe** and the dispersal, about 5.30 p.m., of C Company 2/2 Battalion, the commander of 3 *Panzer Regiment* had swung his attack southwards towards Evangelismos, on the road to **Larisa**; 2 Company 1/3 *Panzer Regiment*, with 7/304 *Infantry Regiment* in support, was now breaking the way.

At the same time three other units were on the move. I/143 *Mountain Regiment* was coming south-eastwards towards the village. On its right flank II/141 *Mountain Regiment* which had just been rushed over the river was advancing towards Makrihorion and **Makrihori**. And still farther west were the companies of III/143 *Mountain Regiment* which had all day been enveloping the left flank of the Australians.

To delay the tanks north of Evangelismos and the infantry who had been crossing the river to the east were A Company 2/2 Battalion, supported by eleven Bren carriers (some from 2/5 and 2/11 Battalions and others from 21 New Zealand Battalion), an Australian anti-tank gun and two New Zealand 25-pounders.

The gun from A Troop 5 Field Regiment (Sergeant **Franklin**¹ was to the east of the railway on the southern outskirts of the village, and when the tanks approached the Australian lines, the crew opened fire. The first two were hit and 'burst with flames.' The third returned fire, hitting a truck loaded with petrol and explosives and forcing Second-Lieutenant Brown,² CPO for the two guns, to order a withdrawal. The crew took to the hills and eventually regained the road, continuing south towards **Larisa** and being picked up by an Australian convoy.

The second gun, that from F Troop 4 Field Regiment (Sergeant **Gunn**³ was more to the south and west. The first two tanks to appear from

that angle were knocked out, but another came up and from a hull-down position began to make a systematic search for the camouflaged gun. The crew then manhandled it about 100 yards to the right and from a slight hollow carried on the duel. When the only remaining armour-piercing shells had been used

¹ Lt J. H. Franklin, MM; Napier; born Levin, 11 Oct 1918; clerk.)

² 2 Lt J. C. Brown; Auckland; born NZ 15 Dec 1913; departmental manager; wounded 30 Nov 1941.

³ Capt J. R. A. Gunn; Wellington; born Durban, 20 Dec 1914; clerk; wounded 18 Apr 1941.),

Gunner Kelly ¹ went forward under fire to the first position to collect some high-explosive charges. Then, when the supporting enemy infantry were seen to be closing in, WO II Tasker ² engaged them with a Bren gun and kept them at a distance, but the end came when a tank shell burst below the 25-pounder and wounded three of the crew. The others attempted to bring out the gun, but the quad could not be backed into the hollow and the unwounded of the crew could not pull the gun out on their own. Tasker and Gunn did the best they could, slipping away in the quad and eventually reaching the F Troop positions, where the fit members remained and the wounded were sent on to Larisa.

In the country between the tanks and the guns there had meanwhile been confused and exciting activity. The supporting tanks had rolled south from Tempe, spreading out across the western flats and 'firing madly' until about 6.5 p.m., when several of them supported by infantry broke into the lines of A Company 2/2 Battalion. Covered by fire from the Bren-carrier group and the 25-pounders, the company moved off to the eastern ridges and hurried southwards. Unfortunately darkness overtook them and they never regained contact with Allen Force.

The tanks had then advanced cautiously through the village towards Headquarters 2/2 Battalion. The Australian anti-tank gun in the area had left 'without orders'.³ The carrier group, including those from 21 Battalion, was able to move out, but a platoon from 2/3 Battalion and Lieutenant Southworth⁴ with his platoon from 21 Battalion were forced into the hills. The signals truck from 2/2 Battalion when it raced off across a ploughed field was shot up in flames. It was then about 6.45 p.m., and as other tanks were appearing across the flats from the west and south-west, Lieutenant-Colonel Chilton ordered his headquarters and B Company to withdraw to the eastern hills. Thereafter in several groups they hurried southwards, often under fire from the German units astride the road and across the more open country to the west.

The gully in which Headquarters 26 Battery had been established was soon untenable, so Major Stewart, who had been observing for E and F Troops, made off to the hills and attempted to rejoin his guns. Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson drove off eastwards, nearly reaching the hill village of Sikourion before he and some Australians turned south to the **Volos** road.

Astride the highway there were now the tanks from 3 *Panzer*

¹ *Gnr J. Kelly; Petone; born Auckland, 13 Mar 1910; insurance agent.*

² *WO II N. C. Tasker, MM; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 17 Aug 1918; letterpress apprentice; p.w. Apr 1941.*

³ *Long, p. 118.*

⁴ *See p. 328.*

Regiment, supported by units from *II/304 Infantry Regiment*. On the western flank and advancing with the tanks were the units from 6

Mountain Division. 1/143 Mountain Regiment which had, since dawn, lost 12 killed, 69 wounded and 1 missing, had not moved south of Evangelismos. Its place had been taken by **I/141 Mountain Regiment** which, with **II/141** coming up in support, was now closing in from the north-west. Their objectives were Point 214, the Nessonis swamp, and possibly— **Larisa**.

Late that afternoon they had occupied the village of **Makrikhori** to the north of Point 214 and cleared the ridges to the south-east. The advance had been supported by Stuka attacks on Point 214 and the road to **Larisa** but, as they afterwards recorded, 'In spite of this, the enemy fought back hard from 1 Km south of PT 214. AA, A Tk and 105 mm guns fired on our troops over open sights.'¹

Such was their opinion of a most gallant and successful delaying action, in the early stages of which the dominant units were E and F Troops of 26 Battery 4 New Zealand Field Regiment. Left with no forward screen after the withdrawal of 2/2 Battalion and with only seven guns between them, they covered the movement of **Allen Force** to the new line which was hastily being established some four miles to the south. F Troop had moved first, covered by E Troop. On the way one quad had been hit by a shell and two men wounded, including Driver **Drinkwater**,² who drove courageously on, clearing the road for the rest of the column. Soon afterwards another quad was hit, the top blown off and two men wounded. In spite of these casualties the troop went into position just north of Makrikhorion and, with Captain Richardson and Lieutenant **Dyson**³ as observers, shelled the infantry and tanks as they moved through Evangelismos and came south astride the highway.

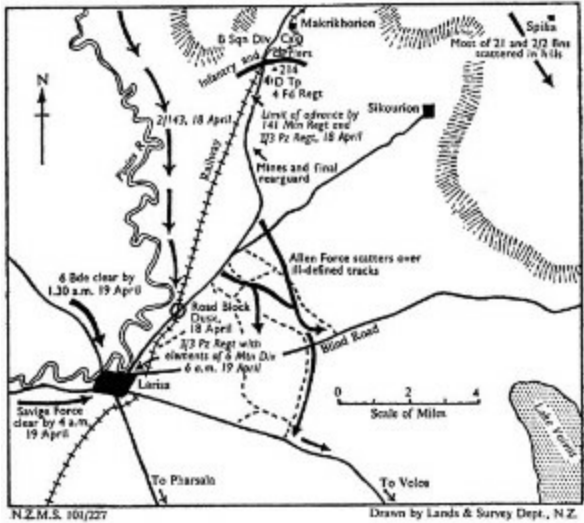
E Troop had then moved back, the sections leapfrogging through each other. Guns hooked to tractors would be brought back and halted at intervals along the road. The trails would then be swung round and the approaching tanks engaged from the roadside. In this way, over open sights, two tanks were definitely destroyed and several others put out of action. As seen by an Australian infantryman it had been an inspiring sight:

The officer stood out in the open directing the fire, the crews crouched behind the shields and fed and fired the guns while everything the enemy had was being pelted at them They looked like a drawing by someone who had never been to a war, but the whole thing was unreal. They got

¹ 3 Panzer Regiment battle report, 18–19 April 1941.

² Dvr H. R. Drinkwater, MM; born NZ 25 Jul 1917; labourer; wounded 18 Apr 1941.

³ Maj R. H. Dyson; Auckland; born Christchurch, 4 Dec 1917; public servant; CO 5 Fd Regt Aug–Dec 1945; now Regular Force.



WITHDRAWAL THROUGH LARISA, MORNING 19 APRIL 1941

WITHDRAWAL THROUGH LARISA, MORNING 19 APRIL 1941

two tanks, lost one gun and pulled the other gun and their wounded out, having done what they could. There was nothing to stop the tanks then, and they formed up and came on. ¹

When E Troop was clear, F Troop engaged the enemy and disabled at least one tank. But the German advance was irresistible and the guns

had to be withdrawn, one section remaining to support B Squadron New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment in the new line, the others taking up positions south of D Troop.

The rearguard by then was in position about the road and railway crossing of Makrihorion. If the line could be held until dark the movement of the tanks would be more limited; if yet another withdrawal was necessary, there were several possible defence lines between there and **Larisa**. The Australian infantry—one company 2/2 Battalion and two companies 2/3 Battalion, both reduced in numbers—were astride the road. In reserve there were Bren carriers from 2/2, 2/5, 2/11 Australian and 21 New Zealand Battalions and a company from 2/3 Battalion, only some thirty strong. And near the railway station was B Squadron of the **Divisional Cavalry**,² which had arrived about midday from the **Elasson** area. Its com-

¹ Long, p. 120.

² See p. 333.

mander, Major J. T. Russell,¹ had been instructed by Brigadier Allen to maintain a line across the valley until 3 a.m. and then to cover the withdrawal of the force. To the east of the road and south of Point 214 was D Troop 4 Field Regiment.

The force had little hope of halting the approaching tanks and, to make the task still more difficult, German aircraft were screaming across the front, strafing and dive-bombing the slightest sign of movement. Even so, the troops fought back when twelve to fifteen tanks broke into the area. Major Stewart, then working across the ridges above the plain, saw Russell 'magnificently handling his squadron.'² But Bren guns and Boys anti-tank rifles made no impression on the German armour and by sundown the squadron was withdrawing from the area.

The Australian infantry were even worse off. 'At one stage ... a group

of fifteen to twenty men were round a tank firing rifles and L. M. G.s to no apparent effect. This tank crushed two men.... The feeling of helplessness against the tanks overcame the troops and they began to move back in small parties to the trucks.’³

There had been all possible support from D Troop 26 Field Battery; in fact Captain Thornton, at the observation post on Point 214, had been delighted with the accuracy of the concentrations. But after 8.30 p.m. the light had faded and about 9 p.m., when the section from E Troop with the **Divisional Cavalry** came back, Major Stewart, who had managed to rejoin the battery, ordered a withdrawal.

The whole front was now hopelessly indefinite, but in unprepared positions about 1000 yards to the south of Point 214 a mixed force of infantrymen and Bren carriers had collected to make yet another stand. It served the purpose. The observer in the leading tank was shot, the column halted and a scene of colourful confusion developed across the front, with tanks milling aimlessly about and carriers pulling back in a world of Very lights, tracer bullets and blazing vehicles.

At this stage Brigadier Allen ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Lamb of 2/3 Battalion to withdraw. So, covered by the **Divisional Cavalry** squadron, the Bren carriers and the lorries with the infantrymen were driven off towards ‘a point where the road crossed a swampy area north of **Larisa**.’⁴

The enemy made no serious attempt to follow up. The darkness and the danger of supporting units firing on each other forced them

¹ Lt-Col J.T. Russel, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; CO **22 Bn** Feb– Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

² One armoured car troop (Lt H. B. Capamagian), which had been sent by Brigadier Allen to cover the road from Sikourion, reported that the enemy was not encircling the right flank.

³ Long, p. 120.

⁴ Ibid., p. 121.

to laager for the night, send out patrols and prepare for an advance at daybreak, 19 April. The casualties of *I/3 Panzer Regiment* had been low, only 4 killed and 37 wounded, but its tank losses had been high: '2 MK IV, 4 MK III and 13 MK II either total losses or out of action for a very long time (including 4 lost in crossing the river) 2 MK IV, 12 MK III and MK II slightly damaged.'¹

More important still, they had not been able to reach **Larisa** and halt the withdrawal of 6 New Zealand Brigade² from **Elasson** and of **Savige Force** from **Zarkos**.³

¹ Battle report by *1/3 Panzer Regiment*, 15–19 April 1941.

² See pp. 305– 12.

³ See pp. 312– 14.

TO GREECE

THE ROAD BLOCK OUTSIDE LARISA, NIGHT 18-19 APRIL

The Road Block outside Larisa, Night 18-19 April

To complete the day's disasters the company ⁴ from *I/143 Mountain Regiment*, with a machine-gun platoon under command, had at last reached the road to the north of **Larisa**. Early that morning they had swum the river just north of Point 264 and, observing the Australians east of Parapotamos, had turned away to the west through Mavrolithos. When approaching Koulouri they had attempted to reach a German airman who had been forced down and was about to be captured by 'English troops who rushed up in trucks.' ⁵ But the English under cover of machine-gun fire had collected the airman and then driven hastily towards **Larisa**, where their excited reports were the probable reason for the rumour that the enemy had entered the town that afternoon.

The company had then turned to the railway embankment, following it for about two miles and observing only a few hundred yards away to the east the transport moving up to relieve Allen Force. The road crossing some two and a half miles north-east of **Larisa** was reached about 8 p.m. and almost immediately two vehicles came through from the battle front. In the first of them was Lieutenant **Penney**, ⁶ the 21 Battalion transport officer who had been sent south to find a route to **Volos** by which the battalion transport could keep clear of the now badly battered **Larisa**. The machine-gunners opened fire, wounding the three occupants and forcing those in the second truck to surrender.

The Germans state that some nine or ten fully loaded English ammunition trucks were the next to be captured, but it has been impossible to decide what unit they came from. The earliest detachment of which there is any record seems to have been two Australian Bren carriers, followed by 9 Light Aid Detachment ⁷ and Lieutenant

⁴ See p. 329.

⁵ Report of action by *2 Company 143 Mountain Regiment at Larisa*, 18–19 April 1941.

⁶ **Capt R. Penney; Hamilton**; born **Scotland**, 18 Dec 1909; sawmiller; p.w. 18 Apr 1941.

⁷ Attached to 26 Battery 4 Field Regiment.

Staveley, ¹ the medical officer of 4 Field Regiment, with an F Troop vehicle filled with wounded. Sharp bursts of fire halted the little column; the Bren carriers attempted to counter-attack but organised resistance was unsuccessful. Some men, including the wounded artillerymen, were taken prisoner but others in the darkness were able to make off on foot towards **Volos**. ²

Immediately after this disaster vehicles from the forward areas were coming through almost continuously. At the head there seems to have been a mixed group which included perhaps seven of the 4 RMT lorries bringing out Australians and members of 21 Battalion. Led by Lieutenant J. Pool, who was familiar with the route, the convoy turned east before the road block and crossed the open country to the **Volos** road. Guides were left at the turn-of but they must have departed soon afterwards, leaving the other convoys to continue on their way and be abruptly halted at the railway crossing.

It is now impossible to give an exact and detailed description of the fighting which developed but the general outline is clear enough. At 10.30 p.m. when the leading vehicle, an Australian one, had pulled up before some obstacle on the highway, the Germans had opened fire, killing or wounding every occupant. In a few minutes other groups of vehicles were jamming up head to tail along the narrow road above the sodden countryside. No large-scale operation was possible. Some men got

out of the way, others took cover and opened fire on the crossing, and others, in small groups, organised counter-attacks. Several New Zealand Bren carriers came forward, a volunteer crew was collected for one of them and an attempt was made to smash through the road block.

With Private **Bond**³ as driver, Sergeant-Major Lockett, Sergeant **Marshall-Inman**⁴ and Private **Black**⁵ led the way in a carrier, and an Australian rushed up his lorry with Driver **Snell**⁶ on the running board to hurl hand grenades. As seen by the Germans, 'two armoured cars came up, firing with all weapons, and tried to crash through the block to the south-east.'⁷ But the explosion of

¹ **Maj J. M. Staveley**, MC; **Auckland**; born Hokitika, 30 Aug 1914; medical officer, Auckland Hospital; medical officer **6 Fd Amb** Mar 1940–Jan 1942; OC 2 Field Transfusion Unit Aug 1943–Apr 1944; Pathologist **2 Gen Hosp** Apr–Nov 1944; three times wounded.

² See p. 344.

³ **Pte G. R. Bond**; born **Scotland**, 8 Mar 1916; truck driver; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

⁴ **Maj R. A. Marshall-Inman**; Tokoroa; born Te Mata, 9 May 1914; linesman; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

⁵ **Pte G. R. A. Black**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Whangarei**, 19 Apr 1918; labourer; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶ **Dvr J. A. Snell**, DCM; **Auckland**; born **Opotiki**, 8 Sep 1915; painter.

⁷ Report of action of *2 Company 143 Mountain Regiment at Larisa*, 18–19 April 1941.

a mortar bomb left the carrier 'slewed across the road', blocking any further movement forward.

Attempts were then made by mixed groups of Australians and New Zealanders to subdue the post, one party afterwards claiming to have killed ¹ the four men in a gun position east of the road. But the Germans were never seriously disturbed and by midnight the attacks were fading away leaving, according to German accounts, 8 killed, 20 seriously wounded and some 30 prisoners of war.

The long column of vehicles strung out along the road to the rear had by then dispersed, the troops having been warned by the streams of tracer fire, the glowing flares and, above all, by the excited reports that came back from the crossing. 'Our carriers returned hot foot with the news that Jerry had taken **Larissa**. We learnt afterwards that parachute troops had done this. Our retreat was blocked. Ahead lay enemy country, behind were his tanks and on both sides was the bog.'² The drivers hastened to turn their vehicles eastwards and to make off along the boggy farm tracks or across the open country.

Some actually encircled the Germans and continued south through **Larisa** and along the main highway to **Thermopylae**. The majority found their way to the **Volos** road and travelled south with the convoys from 6 Brigade now coming through from **Elasson**. Those from 26 Field Battery used a road that had, fortunately, been reconnoitred by Captain **Nicholson**.³ The two lorries held back by Major Harding to collect the last of 21 Battalion moved through with those of 2/3 Battalion and managed, by skirting the foothills, to reach the road and continue south through the defensive positions which 6 Brigade was preparing to occupy in the **Volos** area.⁴

By the night of 20–21 April it was possible to estimate, provisionally, the losses suffered by **Allen Force**. Two hundred and fifty all ranks from 2/2 Battalion and 500 all ranks from 2/3 Battalion had reported to Headquarters 16 Australian Brigade in the **Brallos** area west of **Thermopylae**. In the action the former had lost 44 killed, 18 wounded

and 67 missing. Twenty-first Battalion's battle casualties had not been heavy—only one officer and three other ranks had been killed or wounded but on 20 April there were only 132 all ranks in the **Thermopylae** area. The majority of the battalion including the 'commanding officer, second-in-command, adjutant,

¹ The German losses were 2 killed, 2 wounded.

² M. Uren, *Kiwi Saga*.

³ Lt-Col S. W. Nicholson, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 22 Feb 1914; customs agent; CO **5 Fd Regt** Oct–Nov 1944; **7 A-Tk Regt** Dec 1944–Mar 1945; **6 Fd Regt** Mar–May 1945.

⁴ See pp. 347– 8.

the four rifle company commanders, and the second-in-command of A, C and D companies' ¹ were missing.

¹ Cody, p. 73.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS ENTER LARISA, 19 APRIL

The Germans enter Larisa, 19 April

By then the enemy had occupied **Larisa**. On the morning after the fighting the German commander at the railway crossing had been told by a civilian that the town was clear of British troops. Quickly sending out patrols, he had begun to move his company southwards along the highway. The advanced guard of *3 Panzer Regiment* had then appeared and before midday infantry and tanks had entered the town together. 'As in **France** trucks in convoy stood on the road and in bushes. All round were guns and A Tk guns, shell shattered or manned only by corpses, and among them Bren carriers and two tanks.'² This may be exaggerated, but the earthquake³ early in the year and the successive air raids in April had certainly left a badly damaged **Larisa**. Nevertheless, there was still much that could have been destroyed, for the Germans were delighted to find supplies of petrol, stores of all kinds and an airfield immediately available for all types of aircraft.

² Report by *3 Panzer Regiment*.

³ On 28 February 1941.

TO GREECE

THE ESCAPE PARTIES

The Escape Parties

The position was very different for those members of **Allen Force** who had been unable to reach the new positions. Many had been forced to surrender and others were still making desperate efforts to move through the occupied areas. Those who did so within the next few days eventually left **Greece** with the main convoys; others, less fortunate, had to endure long journeys by way of **Crete**, **Cyprus** or even **Turkey**.

Thus Major Harding, who had been following the last two trucks of 21 Battalion, turned eastwards from the ambush and, like many others, followed a road which proved to be blind. When forced to leave his bogged pick-up he trudged south down the eastern side of Lake Voivis, collecting as he went eight Australians and twenty-two men from 21 Battalion. Late on 20 April when the almost exhausted party was about ten miles from **Almiros**, Harding went on alone, part of the way on horseback, part of the way with three Australians in a commandeered taxi, and finally in a van which reached Headquarters 5 Brigade at **Molos** on the morning of 21 April. The probable movements of the 21 Battalion group were explained, possible moves by the **Navy** to pick up the parties were suggested and two boats were taken across the bay to pick up ⁴ his party.

⁴ Cody, p. 75: 'However, two boats were taken across the bay by engineers to pick up the rest of Harding's party.'

A smaller party, Lance-Sergeant **Anderson** ¹ and four other ranks, took a little longer to get clear. They walked through to the **Volos** area, stole a boat and sailed down the coast to join the battalion at **Thermopylae** just before it moved south to the embarkation beaches.

Other parties had more difficulty in getting through to the coast and in finding shipping to take them behind the lines at **Thermopylae**. From the road block outside **Larisa** Lieutenant Staveley, with one Australian and nine New Zealanders, the majority from 4 Field Regiment, had crossed the swamp to the east and had been taken by a Greek across Lake Voiviis. They reached **Volos** on the morning of 20 April, but as the Greek headquarters in the area was about to surrender, the party hastened south-east round the peninsula towards Trikeri and on the way was joined by Lieutenants Flavell and Smith from 21 Battalion.² On the night of 23–24 April some thirty-six all ranks went aboard a caique and sailed through the channel between Euboea and the mainland while the artillery battle was being waged about **Thermopylae**. Next morning they disembarked at **Khalkis**, were taken to **Thebes** and eventually to **Argos** in southern **Greece**, from which large-scale evacuations were taking place.

Sergeant **Crowley**³ and seven other men from 4 RMT Company had similar adventures. They took to the hills after the ambush, found their way to the coast and, by twice using Greek caiques, reached the Allied lines. They were then sent to the embarkation area about **Argos** and their history, like that of many others in that area, is yet another story.⁴

The larger groups took much longer to rejoin 21 Battalion. Captain **Dutton**,⁵ Father Sheely⁶ (the battalion chaplain) and Lieutenant **Hollis**⁷ of 26 Field Battery, with three or four other ranks who had been forced from the road block into the hills, did not reach the coast near **Keramidhi** until 21 April but they were able to charter a small caique and prepare to sail to **Volos**.

At this stage Lieutenant-Colonel Macky appeared with eight officers and thirty-five men. His original intention had been to march from the **Tempe** area to Sikourion, but the Greeks had

¹ **L-Sgt F. J. Anderson; Auckland; born Auckland, 12 Mar 1913; labourer; wounded May 1941.**

² See p. 328.

³ **Sgt B. J. Crowley**, DCM, EM; **Auckland**; born **Dunedin**, 24 Jun 1914; salesman; p.w. 28 Apr 1941; escaped 23 Sep 1943.

⁴ See p. 443.

⁵ **Capt G. A. Dutton**; **Katikati**; born **Stirling**, Otago, 27 Jun 1910; school-teacher; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

⁶ **Rev. Fr. W. Sheely**, m.i.d.; **Te Aroha**; born **Hunterville**, 5 Oct 1907; priest; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

⁷ **Maj R. A. C. Hollis**, MC; **Masterton**; born **Wellington**, 12 Mar 1910; public accountant; OC 46 Bty 4 Fd Regt, May–Oct 1944.

warned him of the German approach to that village and led the party to the snowline level on Mount Ossa and down through the forest to the east coast. So after negotiations with the owner of the caique the parties combined and sailed south, towing a small boat to carry the surplus passengers. At a village south of Zagora the mayor was placed under escort until a more suitable vessel was hired and the party then set off with the intention of getting behind the New Zealand lines at **Thermopylae**. At Skipelos, however, the sympathetic Greeks warned them that the British were withdrawing from that line and preparing for a complete evacuation. Macky then decided to make for the island of Andros, from which he could sail either to **Piræus** or to **Crete**, but by dawn on 24 April the caique was well off course and it was decided to sail eastward to Chios, off the coast of **Turkey**. From there they sailed south from Island to island, the caique foundering at Siros after a bombing raid and the party, by then fifty-one strong, reaching **Crete** on 2 May in another caique with a party of Greek officers. The little odyssey in such historic seas had been romantic but exacting, for in the mountains they had been bitterly cold and the food had varied from

almost nothing to a plentitude of roast lamb, beans, eggs and olives with 'enough left over for the next day.' The majority went on to join the battalion above **Maleme** airfield but, as was the case with most parties, several members had to be sent into hospital to recover.

Three days later another group arrived in **Crete** under the command of Captain A. C. Trousdale. With D Company he had overlooked the battlefield at **Tempe** from the ridge above Battalion Headquarters and had decided that the speed of the German advance southwards made it impossible for him to attempt to reach the road to **Larisa**. He had therefore led his group south-east over the forested ranges towards the coast, where he hoped to be picked up by the **Navy**. On the way Lieutenant Yeoman appeared with 41 New Zealanders and 30 Australians and at Spelia there was Major Cohen with over 100 Australians. The parties moved off along the ridge running north of Cape Dhermatas and on the night of 20 April they were joined by Captain Tongue, Second-Lieutenant Mason and seventeen other ranks. Several smaller parties appeared and before long there were 108 New Zealanders and a corresponding number of Australians. As it was almost impossible for any one village to feed the party the men divided into groups, all of which were 'constantly hungry, tired, footsore and cold, some ill and some wounded.'¹ Trousdale and Yeoman reached the coast at **Keramidhi** and with some Australians went from island to island

¹ Report from Captain Trousdale.

until, on 10 May, they reached **Crete** with sixty all ranks. An Australian captain and Second-Lieutenant **Wilson**,¹ who had been left on the island of Tinos to bring out two other groups, reached Egypt some weeks later by way of **Cyprus**.

The group with Captain Tongue, as with all the leaders, changed from time to time, the men being free to make their own choice when they thought they saw better chances to escape. Those who remained with him eventually reached the coast south of **Volos** and in a hired boat

were taken to the south-eastern extremity of the island of Euboea. Unable to hire another vessel, they appropriated three small boats in which they departed eastwards under fire from the exasperated owner.² Their troubles had only just begun. One boat was leaking badly so the crew of six had to be crowded into the other two. Soon afterwards the bowsprit of the larger vessel cracked, leaving the smaller one to carry on alone and eventually reach **Turkey** with four men. The crippled vessel, with Tongue in command and sixteen men aboard, reached Skiros after fourteen hours' rowing and from there was sailed to the coast of **Turkey**. Here they were well cared for, eventually being sent to Egypt with other detachments of Australians and New Zealanders, including Lieutenant-Colonel Chilton of 2/2 Australian Battalion.

¹ **Capt F. E. Wilson**, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born NZ 1 Aug 1915; clerk; p.w. 21 Nov 1941; escaped 16 Sep 1943.

² In 1941 the **New Zealand Government** accepted responsibility for honouring **Freyberg's** promise that Greeks would be rewarded for helping New Zealand soldiers to escape. Later, arrangements were made to compensate Greeks who helped escapers during the war.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 15 – THE PREPARATION OF THE THERMOPYLAE LINE

CHAPTER 15

The Preparation of the Thermopylae Line

The Germans approach Thermopylae

ON the morning of 19 April the Germans entered **Larisa** but, rather surprisingly, the thrust from the north then lost its momentum for two complete days. The groups from *2 Panzer Division* which had forced the **Pinios Gorge** and broken **Allen Force** were short of petrol. The force coming over **Olympus Pass** had been halted at **Elasson** by **6 Brigade** and then forced to wait until its engineers had repaired the **Pinios** bridge outside **Larisa**. The units from **Servia Pass** had cleared the demolitions left by **4 Brigade**, but they had first been blocked by the traffic from **Mount Olympus** and then ordered to give priority to the *Luftwaffe* ground staff. Consequently, it was not until late on 20 April that the advance was once more under way.

On the western flank, however, there had been swifter movement. After its repulse at **Servia Pass** *XXXX Corps* had sent detachments from *9 Panzer Division* to make an outflanking movement through **Grevena**. They had met with little opposition and on the night of 16–17 April some were probing east towards **Dheskati** and others had reached the **Venetikos River**. *Fifth Panzer Division* then took over; the river was bridged, and by 18 April the advanced guard had followed **Savige Force** through **Kalabaka** to **Trikkala** and switched south-east through **Kardhitsa** towards the main highway, south of **Larisa** and ahead of *2 Panzer Division*.

This success decided **Marshal List**. The double thrust was abandoned and the pursuit of **W Force** became the responsibility of *5 Panzer Division*, whose forward units entered **Lamia** on the night of 20–21 April.

The Rearguard at Volos

By then **Anzac Corps** on 19–20 April had completed its withdrawal. On the coastal route **6 Brigade Group** had been informed, ¹ probably

after **Freyberg** had visited the crumbling front about **Tempe**, that it must cover the withdrawal ² of **Allen Force**.

¹ There is no record of this instruction nor of the means by which it was given; see p. 311.

² See **Chapter 14**.

Consequently, on the morning of 19 April 24 Battalion was astride the road at **Nea Ankhialos** facing **Volos**, and 25 Battalion was on the high ground south of and facing **Veletinon**. But almost immediately it was decided that the withdrawal should be continued in daylight: the *Luftwaffe* had made no reconnaissance, remnants of **Allen Force** had been collected and there were no signs of the enemy following up.

Twenty-fifth Battalion, still having the lorries of 4 RMT Company, was able to make an immediate and undisturbed withdrawal, but for 24 Battalion it was not so simple. The vehicles in which its companies had been withdrawn from **Elasson** were now 70 miles away in the divisional area at **Molos**. Uncertain that any transport could be sent back, Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth ordered his battalion to prepare for a long march. At 10 a.m. the companies, loaded with arms and equipment, were on the road to **Lamia** but they had covered only about 12 miles before they were halted. Shuttleworth had decided that it would be wiser to take up a defensive position just north of **Almiros** and there wait for the first to come, the enemy or the expected transport.

The brigade rearguard, ¹ commanded by Major Williams and supported by the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** and C Troop 5 Field Regiment, had remained astride the road north-west of **Volos** directing to **Molos** the remnants of **Allen Force** which were coming in from the **Tempe** area. But about midday it was instructed to withdraw immediately to cover the withdrawal to **Molos** of 6 Brigade. Outside **Almiros** it became the rearguard for 24 Battalion, with the **Divisional**

Cavalry Regiment towards the hills in the north-west and the main body in a defensive position supported by C Troop 5 Field Regiment. Meanwhile Regimental Headquarters, **Divisional Cavalry Regiment, had wirelessed back to Divisional Headquarters asking for transport. About 6 p.m., as a result of this message, or more probably because Lieutenant **Carnachan**,² the intelligence officer of 24 Battalion, had gone back to Divisional Headquarters, the lorries of 4 RMT Company came up from **Molos**. The battalion crowded aboard and the convoy hastened towards **Lamia**. As the Germans were known to be advancing towards that junction town the rearguard led the way, leaving the Divisional Cavalry Regiment to cover the withdrawal. There was an almost immediate delay because of an air raid, which resulted in parts of **Lamia** being in flames when the convoy went through, but by dawn next morning the battalion was safely at **Thermopylae**.**

¹ See p. 307, note 1.

² **Capt J. L. G. Carnachan; Auckland; born Waihi, 4 Dec 1903; school-teacher; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.**

The Rearguard at Dhomokos

On the main highway the rearguard was about **Dhomokos**, the scene of the decisive battle of the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, and an ancient fortress town on the northern edge of the scrub-covered ridges between **Pharsala** and **Lamia**. On 17 April Australian units had moved into position. The 2/6 Battalion, with one company of 2/5 Battalion, was on the eastern side of the road and 2/7 Battalion on the western side, both units immediately to the north of the town, with 2/1 Field Regiment in support. In reserve were 2/4 and 2/8 Battalions of 19 Brigade which had withdrawn from the north. On 18 April, when the withdrawal of **W Force** was well under way, Brigadier Lee 'decided that it was unlikely that he would be hard pressed by the enemy before the remainder of the New Zealand and Australian divisions had passed through **Lamia**.'¹ The 2/4

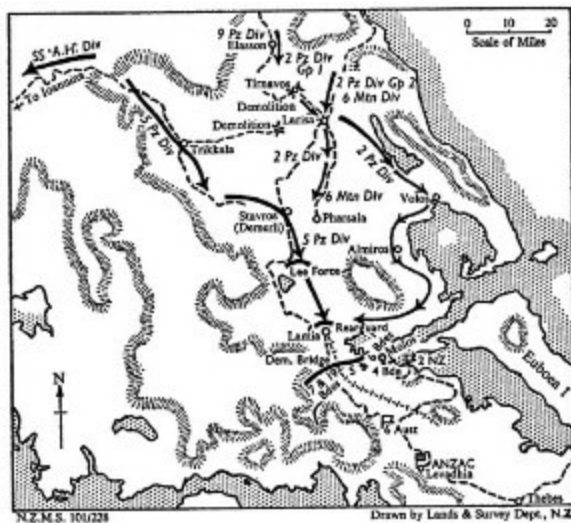
Battalion (less one company) and 2/8 Battalion were then sent back to the Australian sector of the **Thermopylae** line. At the same time he had to be prepared to halt the tanks of the German advanced guard. Captain **Sweetzer**² and eight two-pounders of 31 New Zealand Anti-Tank Battery were therefore withdrawn from the stream of traffic and placed in position to cover the crossroads just north of **Dhomokos**.

On 19 April there were heavy and persistent air attacks³ along the road between **Larisa** and **Lamia**, but the Anzac convoys, miles long and closely spaced, were moving steadily southwards to the **Brallos Pass** or **Thermopylae** areas. As the rearguard was still expected to hold **Dhomokos** Pass until the night of 21–22 April, it was strengthened still further by the addition of the five remaining tanks of 3 Royal Tank Regiment. In the late afternoon, however, when it was evident that the last of **W Force** would reach the new line without any serious interference from the enemy, General Mackay decided that **Lee Force** could withdraw that very night, 19–20 April. At 7 p.m., therefore, the first demolitions were blown.

An hour later several trucks came south towards **Dhomokos** and men from them could be seen repairing the highway. Until it was learnt that they were British engineers and Cypriot pioneers, the men were under fire, but eventually a patrol went forward to bring them in and to wreck the trucks. Another problem arose next morning. No instructions had been given to 31 New Zealand Anti-Tank Battery and its two gun crews forward of the demolitions. Consequently Sweetzer, when he discovered that he was isolated, had to destroy his guns and find his own way back. Elsewhere the

¹ Long, p. 135.

² Maj D. J. Sweetzer, ED; Levin; born Grass Valley, W. Aust., 18 Jan 1910; insurance assessor; 4 Fd Regt 1939–41; bty comd 7 A-Tk Regt, Nov 1941–Jul 1943.



THE GERMANS APPROACH THERMOPYLAE, 19-21 APRIL 1941

THE GERMANS APPROACH THERMOPYLAE, 19-21 APRIL 1941

withdrawal which began at 9 p.m. was smoothly executed, the line being clear by 10.30 p.m.

As Lee had already made certain that 6 New Zealand Brigade would soon be through **Lamia**, his main body went straight back to the **Brallos Pass** area. But because of the uncertainty about Allen Force and its withdrawal from **Tempe**, Major H. G. Guinn was left with a small force on the ridges above **Lamia** to delay the enemy until the last troops had come through from **Volos**. A company from 2/7 Battalion was astride the road and to the right of it; a 2/6 Battalion company was to the left; the five cruiser tanks were in front of the infantry covering tank country to the west of the road; and Lieutenant Atchison with four armoured cars from C Troop New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment was to the east of the road. In support there was a company from 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion.

No air attacks were made that morning, Sunday 20 April, but about 11 a.m. a large German troop-carrying aircraft landed on the flat country near **Xinia**, a village some three miles in front of the line. Some Australians started out to capture it but their failure to hear withdrawal

orders led to the officer in command carrying on alone and being captured. Nevertheless, the men of *8 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit*, the leading formation of *5 Panzer Division*, did not seem to realise that the ridge was held for early that afternoon motor-cycles with side-cars came down the road and were badly shot up. 'One of our patrols had fallen into an ambush at the northern end of the Furka pass and lost 6 killed' ¹ After that there was a lull, though German infantrymen were occasionally under fire from Australian infantrymen. But at last the German tanks came forward and swung off into the open country to the west of the road. The cruiser tanks then came out of cover, halting at least three of the German tanks and losing one of their own: 'A thin wisp of smoke climbed from inside it into the twilight sky.' ²

The fighting then died down, heavy rain fell and the Germans hastened to bring up their mortars. Half an hour later when the weather cleared they opened fire, but before long the crews and any infantrymen moving below the pass were taking cover from the Australian machine-gun fire. At this stage Lee, having decided that the last of the Australian and New Zealand troops must be through *Lamia*, advised Guinn that he was free to return. It was then about 5 p.m.

The movement of the infantry from their camouflaged positions soon attracted the attention of the German mortars and light artillery. Some haste and confusion developed and one of the armoured cars when it reached the highway was destroyed by shellfire, but before long the force was clear. Two tanks had held the road, Sergeant *Harper* ³ had brought in one of the anti-tank guns from an exposed position and Second-Lieutenant Hill ⁴ had with great coolness assisted in embussing the infantry and withdrawing the six anti-tank guns.

After the engineers, covered by machine-gun fire, had blown their demolitions along the highway the last of the rearguard withdrew, the armoured cars of the *Divisional Cavalry* bringing up the rear. Later two of the cruiser tanks which broke down were placed across the road and set on fire, but otherwise the withdrawal through *Lamia* to the

Thermopylae line was completed without further trouble.

¹ *2 Panzer Division* war diary, 21 April, with note about events of 20 April.

² *Von Serbien bis Kreta (From Serbia to Crete)*, prepared by a German publicity unit in **Greece**, 1942, p. 90. Translated.

³ **Sgt C. H. Harper**, MM; born **Auckland**, 8 Apr 1918; ship repairer; died of wounds 30 Nov 1941.

⁴ **2 Lt M. C. Hill**, MC; born **Wellington**, 11 Jul 1913; assurance clerk; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

Anzac Corps assembles on the Thermopylae Line

Actually **Lee Force** was not the last of **W Force** to reach the **Thermopylae** line. All through 20 April several New Zealand detachments were out along the coast road to and beyond **Stilis**. In the morning **A Troop 25 Battery 4 Field Regiment** was sent round to check enemy tanks which were expected to come through from **Volos**, but the CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton, sent the troop back to Anthili, where with **C Company 20 Battalion** (less a platoon to protect demolition parties) it went into an anti-tank position covering the highway south from **Lamia**. The engineer officers and their respective groups remained about **Stilis** to complete the demolitions. Second-Lieutenant **Wells**¹ of **6 Field Company** dealt with the bridge over the ravine at Pelasyia; Lieutenants **Hector** and **Lindell**² from **7 Field Company** with the launches and sailing craft along the coast as far as **Stilis**; and in the little port itself **Captain Woolcott**³ with a party from **6 Field Company** smashed up the boats along the waterfront. All parties, engineers and supporting troops then withdrew, firing minor road demolitions and leaving the **Volos–Lamia** road to the enemy.

The same day engineers from **7 Field Company** had gone back to

Lamia, where they collected engines and rolling stock and brought two trains south beyond **Thermopylae**. There had been a third train but Australian engineers, probably working to a timetable, demolished a viaduct before it was clear of the town. The train was run into the river below and the engineers tramped back towards the defences. Unfortunately they were thought to be German patrols, the infantry opened fire and it was not until next morning that they could establish their identity.

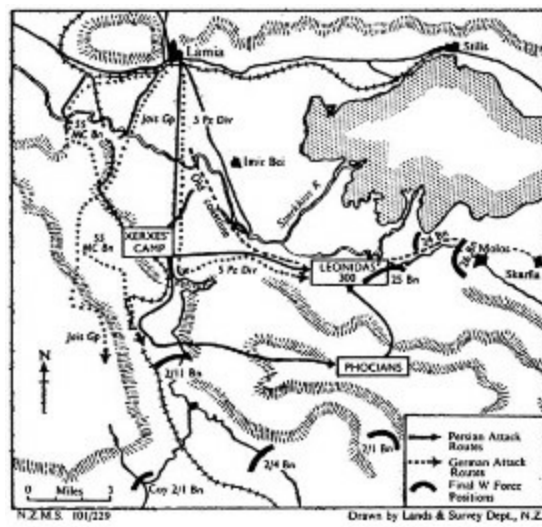
Finally, there was the recovery of survivors from **Allen Force** who might have reached the coast near **Volos**. On the night of 21–22 April Captain Woolcott with his demolition party set out from **Atalandi** in a small diesel-engined fishing launch and picked up on the north-west corner of **Euboea Island** two Australians and six members of 21 Battalion.

South of the rearguards, **Anzac Corps** had been assembling behind the Sperkhios River, the New Zealand Division in the narrow strip between the sea and the mountains known as the pass of **Thermopylae** and 6 Australian Division on the range to the west about **Brallos Pass**. In classical times the entrance to the coastal gap

¹ **Capt J. O. Wells**; Horotiu, **Waikato**; born **Wellington**, 14 Sep 1909; structural engineer; p.w. Apr 1941.

² **Maj G. A. Lindell**, DSO, OBE, ED; **Wellington**; born **Taihape**, 26 Nov 1906; engineer; **7 Fd Coy** 1940–41; Adjnt, NZ Div Engrs, 1941–42; SSO Engrs, Army HQ, 1943–44; OC **7 Fd Coy** 1944–46; twice wounded; CRE NZ Div (Lt-Col) 1953–55.

³ **Maj H. C. S. Woolcott**; born **Auckland**, 29 May 1909; civil engineer; wounded 1 Dec 1941; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.



THE THERMOPYLAE BATTLEFIELD, 480 BC AND 1941

THE THERMOPYLAE BATTLEFIELD, 480 BC AND 1941

had been narrow, but the silt brought down by the Sperkhios River had extended it some five miles to the east. Between the road and the sea there were now swamps and sodden fields. But the blue sulphurous stream still flowed from **Thermopylae** and to the west there were still the scrub-covered ridges and the precipitous water-courses below the grey, forbidding cliffs. To the rear again, beyond the village of **Molos** with its plane trees and its grape vines, there were fields of corn and magnificent olive groves, and then the narrowest strip of all with the blue sea on the one side and 500-foot cliffs on the other.

The Australians held the range which runs westwards into the interior. It was high and remarkable for its pinnacles and precipices, for the dense undergrowth on the hillsides, for the stunted oaks in the gullies, the world of pines about **Brallos Pass** and the narrow highway winding south to **Thebes**. Below it and to the west lay the deep gorge of the Asopos River through which the railway disappears into tunnels ¹ or edges round buttressed embankments.

¹ See p. 472.

In 480 BC Xerxes, the Persian, unable to force the coastal gap, had sent his Immortals into the Asopos Gorge. Thence, after a short

distance, they had turned eastwards up the ridges and through the groves of oak to surprise the Phocian sentries and outflank the forces of Leonidas, the Spartan king. In April 1941, with the Australians holding **Brallos Pass**, there was no danger of another surprise attack by this route, but the natural advantages of the **Thermopylae– Brallos** line could still be seriously threatened. If the Germans were able to seize the island of Euboea they could outflank the New Zealand sector. Should they circle through the mountains to the west they could come in behind the Australians by way of the secondary roads to Gravia and Amfissa, or, if they followed the roads from Epirus, they could turn in along the north coast of the Gulf of **Corinth** towards Amfissa and Delphi. Much therefore depended upon the resistance of the Greeks along this western flank.

The task for the moment, however, was the preparation of new defences. The orders received verbally from **Anzac Corps** at **Levadhia** on the morning of 19 April were that the New Zealand Division should prepare to defend the pass at **Thermopylae**, and Brigadier Puttick, as the senior officer in the area, had instructed 5 Brigade to take up a position covering the whole front. Twenty-first Battalion had been shattered at the **Pinios Gorge** and 22 Battalion had been troubled by the diversion near **Pharsala**, but the greater part of the brigade had reached the area and had been able to rest and reorganise. Twenty-eighth Battalion therefore moved to the Ay Trias area on the right flank near the coast; 22 Battalion went to the west of **Molos**; and 23 Battalion to the left of the sector but not as yet to the steep positions east of **Brallos Pass**.

In the narrow strip between the sea and the hot springs at **Thermopylae** 6 Field Regiment, which had come back with 4 Brigade Group, deployed to cover the road from **Lamia**. The other regiments of artillery, having been dispersed to support several different formations, had to be organised as they came in. In the meantime the CRA, Brigadier Miles, collected all the artillerymen he could find and organised temporary anti-tank defences with groups of 25-pounders and two-pounders along the highway between **Thermopylae** and **Molos**. Through this line his detachments came in from the north: 25 Battery 4

Field Regiment with **Savige Force** from **Kalabaka**; 26 Battery with **Allen Force** from **Tempe**; 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment, less A Troop, with 6 Brigade from **Elasson**; and finally 28 Battery, less F Troop with 6 Brigade, from the **Larisa** airfield.

Late that afternoon, 19 April, **General Freyberg** took command and was able to report to Headquarters **W Force** that his division had successfully withdrawn. Twenty-first Battalion was 'in a bad way' but the move had been completed more successfully than had been expected. Twenty-fourth and 25th Battalions were coming in from the **Volos** area and 26 Battalion was completing its train journey to the rear of the Australian lines. Trucks were still turning off from the long convoys and a general sorting out of troops was still taking place. But it was often difficult to locate units for some had been directed to areas far behind the line, Divisional Headquarters, for instance, having been sent by **Anzac Corps** to **Longos**, well back from the forward area.

The New Zealand Sector

Next morning, 20 April, **General Freyberg** discussed with his senior officers the defences of the **Thermopylae** sector. The **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and supporting troops were to go forward, keeping in touch with the enemy and acting as a screen behind which demolitions could be prepared. But the move never took place; the demolitions were complete by nightfall and a covering force was unnecessary. The divisional sector was to extend westwards from **Ay Trias** to the hairpin bend on the **Brallos Pass** road and the line was to have been along the **Sperkhios** River, which would be held by infantry fire at night and by artillery during the day. Here, too, there had to be some adjustments. As the marshy flats from the **Sperkhios** River to **Ay Trias** were largely untenable by infantry, the forward line was forced back to the edge of the high country and south of the small stream running parallel to the river. The basis of the defence system had, therefore, to be the observed fire of the artillery and, as the gun positions could be encircled by a landing on the coast, the occupied area had to be extended far to the

rear. As a result it was decided that in the forward area 6 Brigade would be on the right, 5 Brigade on the left; in reserve and watching the coast for possible landings would be 4 Brigade and the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**.

That afternoon and night, 20–21 April, adjustments were made. Twenty-fourth Battalion moved up to the **Ay Trias** area with its right flank on the nearby coast; 22 Battalion came up to the left and 28 (Maori) Battalion, the original occupant of the area, moved to a sector west of **Thermopylae** and facing north towards the road.

Still farther west, 23 Battalion had been in the area overlooking the bridge across the Sperkhios River, but it now had to make several laborious adjustments to cover the gap which had been left between the left flank of the New Zealand Division and the right flank of 6 Australian Division. In the end B Company was astride the road to the south of the bridge; A Company was on the spur to the south and C Company in the high country to the west. D Company, which had been transported at dusk across the front and back up the pass road, was in the rough country just east of the great bend. Once the bridge over the Sperkhios River was blown this company would be cut off from the rest of the battalion; the only line of approach would then be the mile of donkey track from the crest of **Brallos Pass** in the Australian sector. Finally, late that night the bridge across the Sperkhios River was wrecked ¹ by 7 Field Company, reports having come through that the Germans had entered **Lamia**. ²

The same day the artillery plan was prepared by Brigadier Miles. Unable to use the marshland near the coast, the regiments were to be on the edge of the high ground west and south of **Molos**. This meant that the guns to cover the bridge in the 23 Battalion sector would have to be almost in the front line and that the main road west of that from **Lamia** to **Brallos Pass** could not be brought under fire. Moreover, the majority of the gun positions, unless carefully camouflaged, would be in full view of the enemy across the gulf. On the other hand the highway would be covered by all the regiments of artillery, British and New Zealand.

The sector was then divided into two zones, anti-tank and field. In the first or western zone to the front of the ridge held by 23 Battalion, K Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery had one gun looking directly north to the Alamanas bridge and the other three along the road past the baths towards **Molos**. The two guns of L Troop— all that remained of 33 Battery—were on the ridge overlooking the road just to the east of K Troop. Continuing the line to **Thermopylae** was 31 Anti-Tank Battery—with only seven guns— one troop on the low marsh ground near the sea and the others on the lower slopes of the 25 Battalion area.

Fifth Field Regiment, which had occupied emergency positions since its arrival on 19 April, now moved to new positions on 21 April. One troop with another 25-pounder under command and E Troop 32 Anti-Tank Battery went to the area between the baths at **Thermopylae** and the foothills. Another battery was responsible for the remainder of the zone, with its rear boundary at the stream running south to north near **Ay Trias**. To the rear 32 Anti-Tank Battery, less E Troop, provided anti-tank defence about Divisional Headquarters.

¹ Very little time would have been needed to repair it. The following night, 21–22 April, four of the brigade Bren carriers covered the bridge while Lt Hector with a small party from 7 Field Company completed the demolition.

² See map on p. 385.

The anti-tank zone was strengthened about **Ay Trias** when 102 Anti-Tank Regiment, which had been with 1 Armoured Brigade, returned from **Thebes** on the night of 20–21 April. B Battery was between the foothills and the coast; C and D Batteries, now only six guns, remained at **Longos** as a mobile reserve. C and F Troops 5 Field Regiment moved in the same night, C Troop placing one section just off the secondary road connecting **Ay Trias** with the highway and the other between the village and the coast. F Troop, which had originally been with the main body of

5 Field Regiment, had been sent back to the area when it was discovered that the flat, apparently swampy country west of **Ay Trias** could possibly be traversed by tanks. The guns were put in behind D Company 25 Battalion facing **Ay Trias**, but with the left-hand gun on a spur from which it could cover several stretches of the main road in front of 25 Battalion.

The field and medium artillery had already fixed and camouflaged their gun positions. On 19 April 4 Field Regiment had hastily occupied positions at Kammaena Vourla, but it was now farther forward in a dry stream bed nearer **Molos**. The same day 6 Field Regiment had moved into positions near **Molos**, but since then it, too, had made several changes. To avoid dead positions, especially on the left flank towards the road to **Brallos Pass**, and to limit the areas exposed to fire from across the gulf, D and F Troops in that order were now in a small valley just east of D Company 25 Battalion.

Second Royal Horse Artillery Regiment had been moving back with the rest of the 1 Armoured Brigade group from **Atalandi** when orders were received to join the New Zealand Division. When turning about it suffered air attacks and seems to have spent 21 April under cover, but next morning one battery was in the Cape Knimis area in an anti-tank role and the other battery in an area south-east of **Molos**. The guns of 64 Medium Regiment went into position on 21 April, with two troops four miles east of **Molos** and one troop well back 15 miles east of the village. The 234th Battery, less C Troop, remained with 7 Medium Regiment in the Kifissokhori area.

In the **Brallos Pass** area to the west of the New Zealand sector were the Australian brigades. On 18 April 2/4 and 2/8 Battalions of 19 Brigade had come back from the **Dhomokos** area; next day and night 2/1 and 2/5 Battalions had come through with Savage Force from the **Kalabaka** area and the remnants of 2/2 and 2/3 Battalions had straggled in from the **Pinios Gorge**. After some adjustment, the position by the end of 21 April was that 19 Brigade extended westwards from the New Zealand sector to the main highway, beyond which 17 Brigade covered

the deep gorge and the country to the west of it, in all about six miles. In reserve was 16 Brigade, with the responsibility of defending the roads through the mountains from the west.

Another problem for **W Force** was the defence of the east coast. There was always the possibility of the enemy crossing to the island of Euboea and moving south to the swing bridge at **Khalkis** well behind the New Zealand lines. In the original plan 1 Armoured Brigade was to have protected this flank but its units were not available. Third Royal Tank Regiment with its few remaining tanks had been sent to the **Athens** area for local defence; **4 Hussars** was still about **Thebes**, but the majority of its tanks had been lost on the long withdrawal from **Macedonia**; and **1 Rangers**, which was still recovering from the engagement at **Veve**, had an anti-parachute role near Force Headquarters at **Thebes**. Consequently the only unit sent to **Khalkis** was 155 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, which then came under the command of the New Zealand Division.

On 21 April the threat became more serious, particularly when the Greeks informed Headquarters **Anzac Corps** that German troops had landed on the north end of Euboea. **Freyberg** was ordered to send his **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment to the island; **1 Rangers** was to hold **Khalkis** bridge; and a New Zealand battalion was to take up an anti-parachute role east of **Thebes**. The orders for the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment were not immediately put into operation, probably because **Freyberg** preferred to guard the flank from the mainland and perhaps because the vehicles of the unit all required workshop attention. As for the other moves, they were delayed once it was known that evacuation was pending.

The last and most obvious problem was the almost complete absence of air cover. Using the landing grounds about **Larisa**, the *Luftwaffe* had been ruthlessly bombing and machine-gunning the convoys along the highway and the more important assembly areas to the rear. The headquarters of both **Anzac Corps** at **Levadhia** and **W Force** at **Thebes** were bombed and the telephone system disrupted. Working parties had

often to break for cover but the casualties throughout the Division were surprisingly light, a single bomb in the 22 Battalion area causing the heaviest casualties—six killed and five wounded.

The outstanding effort of the day was probably that of Driver **Macdonald**,¹ who had been sent with others of the Supply Column to find some urgently needed petrol. Three trainloads of petrol, shells and anti-tank mines had eventually been located at **Levadhia**, but in the early morning when the trucks were being loaded Stukas

¹ **Dvr J. G. Macdonald**, MM; born **Oamaru**, 18 Jun 1909; clerk; killed in action May 1941.

had come screaming down towards the railway yard. Petrol trucks were hit and soon ablaze; the flames spread to other trucks and heavy shells began to explode. Macdonald and Sergeant H. Killalea of the Australian Corps of Signals thereupon dashed to the only engine in sight, discovered how to operate it and shunted into safety twenty-eight trucks loaded with petrol, oil and ammunition.

To check these raids there was little that the **Royal Air Force** could do. The Wellington bombers had been flown to Egypt on 17–18 April; the Blenheims after 19 April were taking key airmen to **Crete** or operating from there to protect the convoys as they came in from **Greece**.

The fighter squadrons which had done their best to protect the columns as they came south from **Larisa** were still using Menidi and **Elevisis**, the airfields near **Athens**, but they now had an impossible task. On 20 April a formation of Me110s slipped through and damaged a dozen Blenheims at Menidi; on three other occasions the fighters beat off the enemy; and then in the afternoon nearly a hundred German aircraft attempted to bomb **Piræus**. At least eight were destroyed and two damaged, but five of the fifteen Hurricanes which intercepted them were shot down. Such odds were obviously too great, so on 22 April the remaining Gladiators were sent to **Crete** and the fifteen Hurricanes to

the Greek training airfield at **Argos**. From there they could possibly cover the movement of troops about the evacuation beaches to the west and south of **Athens**.

Adjustments to the Line, 21 April, and Night 21-22 April

In the New Zealand sector on 21 April the troops were hastily digging in, camouflaging and preparing barbed-wire entanglements across the front. Changes were still being made to adjust the line so that each brigade should have two battalions forward and one in reserve, but this meant further movement for several units.

On the right flank 24 Battalion, which had already moved forward, was now well established about **Ay Trias**, a deserted village with spring vegetables and abandoned poultry. The line ran roughly north and south from the sea to the **Lamia– Molos** road. Three companies, A, B and C, held from the coast to the road, while D Company was in reserve behind C Company and just south of the highway. Twenty-fifth Battalion now came up from the **Molos** area to take over the area in which 22 Battalion had been preparing positions and linking up the left flank of 6 Brigade with the right flank of 5 Brigade. All six platoons of D and B Companies were in line along the hills. A Company was at right angles to the road, with 9 Platoon astride it and 8 and 7 Platoons on the south side towards the hills.

Twenty-sixth Battalion, which had just come through ¹ by motor transport from the Australian sector, was in brigade reserve to the west of **Molos** with its Bren carriers patrolling the coast between 24 Battalion and 4 Brigade.

Farther west in the 5 Brigade sector there was similar haste in the preparation of the line and in the movement of units. Twenty-second Battalion had moved forward for the third time and was now between 25 and 28 (Maori) Battalions. The Maoris, assisted by a company from 18 Battalion, were wiring and preparing slit trenches and enjoying the bath houses alongside the upper reaches of the **Thermopylae** stream. And on

the extreme left 23 Battalion was busily settling down. The Australians had taken over the great bend in the road below **Brallos Pass**, leaving D Company free to join A Company and to assist in the packing of wire and supplies up the steep slopes.

As 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion had reassembled after the withdrawal from the north, companies were allocated to support all units: 3 Company with 6 Brigade; 4 Company with 5 Brigade; 1 Company, less a platoon, with 4 Brigade; and 2 Company, less a platoon, in Divisional Reserve. The detached platoons were about the **Longos** headland with a beach-watching role.

In the forward areas the situation throughout the day gradually became more tense. German vehicles could be seen entering **Lamia** and late that afternoon the Australian artillery on the **Brallos Pass** road opened fire on transport moving south towards the Sperkhios River.

About the same time two motor-cyclists rode confidently up to the demolished bridge which was picketed by the carrier platoon. One German was killed, the other captured. They were from *8 Potsdam Reconnaissance Unit (5 Panzer Division)*, of which one company had entered **Lamia** about midday. The main body of the division was still strung out along the highway, but after dark the lights in the distant hills showed that hundreds of vehicles were approaching the town.

There was also much movement behind the New Zealand lines, where 4 Brigade was preparing to take over its task of coast-watching and anti-parachute defence in the rear areas. At dusk 20 Battalion moved to the stretch between Karia and **Cape Knimis**, 19 Battalion began to move south-east of **Molos** and 18 Battalion went to the south of Skarfia. These moves were being made when orders were received for one battalion to be sent immediately to a dispersal area four miles west of **Levadhia**. From there it would reconnoitre defensive positions in the Delphi Pass. No reasons were given and no record can be found, but it is probable that the news of the Greek surrender in Epirus forced this move to cover the extreme left flank. Whatever it was, 19 Battalion in the hastily collected

trucks of the Ammunition Company was taken that night to [Levadhia](#).

¹ See [p. 310](#).

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS APPROACH THERMOPYLAE

The Germans approach Thermopylae

ON the morning of 19 April the Germans entered **Larisa** but, rather surprisingly, the thrust from the north then lost its momentum for two complete days. The groups from *2 Panzer Division* which had forced the **Pinios Gorge** and broken **Allen Force** were short of petrol. The force coming over **Olympus Pass** had been halted at **Elasson** by **6 Brigade** and then forced to wait until its engineers had repaired the **Pinios bridge** outside **Larisa**. The units from **Servia Pass** had cleared the demolitions left by **4 Brigade**, but they had first been blocked by the traffic from **Mount Olympus** and then ordered to give priority to the *Luftwaffe* ground staff. Consequently, it was not until late on 20 April that the advance was once more under way.

On the western flank, however, there had been swifter movement. After its repulse at **Servia Pass** **XXXX Corps** had sent detachments from *9 Panzer Division* to make an outflanking movement through **Grevena**. They had met with little opposition and on the night of 16–17 April some were probing east towards **Dheskati** and others had reached the **Venetikos River**. *Fifth Panzer Division* then took over; the river was bridged, and by 18 April the advanced guard had followed **Savige Force** through **Kalabaka** to **Trikkala** and switched south-east through **Kardhitsa** towards the main highway, south of **Larisa** and ahead of *2 Panzer Division*.

This success decided **Marshal List**. The double thrust was abandoned and the pursuit of **W Force** became the responsibility of *5 Panzer Division*, whose forward units entered **Lamia** on the night of 20–21 April.

TO GREECE

THE REARGUARD AT VOLOS

The Rearguard at Volos

By then **Anzac Corps** on 19–20 April had completed its withdrawal. On the coastal route 6 Brigade Group had been informed, ¹ probably after **Freyberg** had visited the crumbling front about **Tempe**, that it must cover the withdrawal ² of **Allen Force**.

¹ There is no record of this instruction nor of the means by which it was given; see p. 311.

² See Chapter 14.

Consequently, on the morning of 19 April 24 Battalion was astride the road at **Nea Ankhialos** facing **Volos**, and 25 Battalion was on the high ground south of and facing **Veletinon**. But almost immediately it was decided that the withdrawal should be continued in daylight: the **Luftwaffe** had made no reconnaissance, remnants of **Allen Force** had been collected and there were no signs of the enemy following up.

Twenty-fifth Battalion, still having the lorries of 4 RMT Company, was able to make an immediate and undisturbed withdrawal, but for 24 Battalion it was not so simple. The vehicles in which its companies had been withdrawn from **Elasson** were now 70 miles away in the divisional area at **Molos**. Uncertain that any transport could be sent back, Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth ordered his battalion to prepare for a long march. At 10 a.m. the companies, loaded with arms and equipment, were on the road to **Lamia** but they had covered only about 12 miles before they were halted. Shuttleworth had decided that it would be wiser to take up a defensive position just north of **Almiros** and there wait for the first to come, the enemy or the expected transport.

The brigade rearguard, ¹ commanded by Major Williams and supported by the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** and C Troop 5 Field Regiment, had remained astride the road north-west of **Volos** directing to **Molos** the remnants of **Allen Force** which were coming in from the **Tempe** area. But about midday it was instructed to withdraw immediately to cover the withdrawal to **Molos** of 6 Brigade. Outside **Almiros** it became the rearguard for 24 Battalion, with the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** towards the hills in the north-west and the main body in a defensive position supported by C Troop 5 Field Regiment. Meanwhile Regimental Headquarters, **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, had wirelessly back to Divisional Headquarters asking for transport. About 6 p.m., as a result of this message, or more probably because Lieutenant **Carnachan**, ² the intelligence officer of 24 Battalion, had gone back to Divisional Headquarters, the lorries of 4 RMT Company came up from **Molos**. The battalion crowded aboard and the convoy hastened towards **Lamia**. As the Germans were known to be advancing towards that junction town the rearguard led the way, leaving the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** to cover the withdrawal. There was an almost immediate delay because of an air raid, which resulted in parts of **Lamia** being in flames when the convoy went through, but by dawn next morning the battalion was safely at **Thermopylae**.

¹ See p. 307, note 1.

² **Capt J. L. G. Carnachan; Auckland; born Waihi, 4 Dec 1903; school-teacher; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.**

TO GREECE

THE REARGUARD AT DHOMOKOS

The Rearguard at Dhomokos

On the main highway the rearguard was about **Dhomokos**, the scene of the decisive battle of the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, and an ancient fortress town on the northern edge of the scrub-covered ridges between **Pharsala** and **Lamia**. On 17 April Australian units had moved into position. The 2/6 Battalion, with one company of 2/5 Battalion, was on the eastern side of the road and 2/7 Battalion on the western side, both units immediately to the north of the town, with 2/1 Field Regiment in support. In reserve were 2/4 and 2/8 Battalions of 19 Brigade which had withdrawn from the north. On 18 April, when the withdrawal of **W Force** was well under way, Brigadier Lee 'decided that it was unlikely that he would be hard pressed by the enemy before the remainder of the New Zealand and Australian divisions had passed through **Lamia**.' ¹ The 2/4 Battalion (less one company) and 2/8 Battalion were then sent back to the Australian sector of the **Thermopylae** line. At the same time he had to be prepared to halt the tanks of the German advanced guard. Captain **Sweetzer** ² and eight two-pounders of 31 New Zealand Anti-Tank Battery were therefore withdrawn from the stream of traffic and placed in position to cover the crossroads just north of **Dhomokos**.

On 19 April there were heavy and persistent air attacks ³ along the road between **Larisa** and **Lamia**, but the Anzac convoys, miles long and closely spaced, were moving steadily southwards to the **Brallos Pass** or **Thermopylae** areas. As the rearguard was still expected to hold **Dhomokos** Pass until the night of 21–22 April, it was strengthened still further by the addition of the five remaining tanks of 3 Royal Tank Regiment. In the late afternoon, however, when it was evident that the last of **W Force** would reach the new line without any serious interference from the enemy, General Mackay decided that **Lee Force** could withdraw that very night, 19–20 April. At 7 p.m., therefore, the

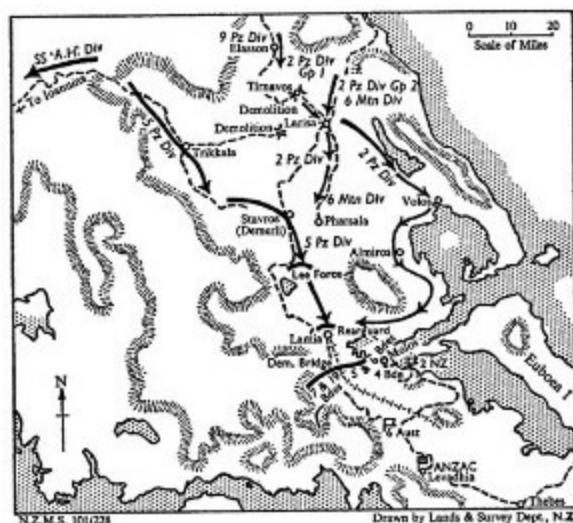
first demolitions were blown.

An hour later several trucks came south towards **Dhomokos** and men from them could be seen repairing the highway. Until it was learnt that they were British engineers and Cypriot pioneers, the men were under fire, but eventually a patrol went forward to bring them in and to wreck the trucks. Another problem arose next morning. No instructions had been given to 31 New Zealand Anti-Tank Battery and its two gun crews forward of the demolitions. Consequently Sweetzer, when he discovered that he was isolated, had to destroy his guns and find his own way back. Elsewhere the

¹ Long, p. 135.

² **Maj D. J. Sweetzer**, ED; **Levin**; born Grass Valley, W. Aust., 18 Jan 1910; insurance assessor; **4 Fd Regt** 1939–41; bty comd **7 A-Tk Regt**, Nov 1941–Jul 1943.

³ See pp. 297– 9.



THE GERMANS APPROACH THERMOPYLAE, 19–21 APRIL 1941

THE GERMANS APPROACH THERMOPYLAE, 19–21 APRIL 1941

withdrawal which began at 9 p.m. was smoothly executed, the line being clear by 10.30 p.m.

As Lee had already made certain that 6 New Zealand Brigade would soon be through **Lamia**, his main body went straight back to the **Brallos Pass** area. But because of the uncertainty about Allen Force and its withdrawal from **Tempe**, Major H. G. Guinn was left with a small force on the ridges above **Lamia** to delay the enemy until the last troops had come through from **Volos**. A company from 2/7 Battalion was astride the road and to the right of it; a 2/6 Battalion company was to the left; the five cruiser tanks were in front of the infantry covering tank country to the west of the road; and Lieutenant Atchison with four armoured cars from C Troop New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment was to the east of the road. In support there was a company from 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion.

No air attacks were made that morning, Sunday 20 April, but about 11 a.m. a large German troop-carrying aircraft landed on the flat country near **Xinia**, a village some three miles in front of the line. Some Australians started out to capture it but their failure to hear withdrawal orders led to the officer in command carrying on alone and being captured. Nevertheless, the men of *8 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit*, the leading formation of *5 Panzer Division*, did not seem to realise that the ridge was held for early that afternoon motor-cycles with side-cars came down the road and were badly shot up. 'One of our patrols had fallen into an ambush at the northern end of the **Furka** pass and lost 6 killed' ¹ After that there was a lull, though German infantrymen were occasionally under fire from Australian infantrymen. But at last the German tanks came forward and swung off into the open country to the west of the road. The cruiser tanks then came out of cover, halting at least three of the German tanks and losing one of their own: 'A thin wisp of smoke climbed from inside it into the twilight sky.' ²

The fighting then died down, heavy rain fell and the Germans hastened to bring up their mortars. Half an hour later when the weather cleared they opened fire, but before long the crews and any infantrymen moving below the pass were taking cover from the Australian machine-gun fire. At this stage Lee, having decided that the last of the Australian

and New Zealand troops must be through **Lamia**, advised Guinn that he was free to return. It was then about 5 p.m.

The movement of the infantry from their camouflaged positions soon attracted the attention of the German mortars and light artillery. Some haste and confusion developed and one of the armoured cars when it reached the highway was destroyed by shellfire, but before long the force was clear. Two tanks had held the road, Sergeant **Harper**³ had brought in one of the anti-tank guns from an exposed position and Second-Lieutenant Hill⁴ had with great coolness assisted in embussing the infantry and withdrawing the six anti-tank guns.

After the engineers, covered by machine-gun fire, had blown their demolitions along the highway the last of the rearguard withdrew, the armoured cars of the **Divisional Cavalry** bringing up the rear. Later two of the cruiser tanks which broke down were placed across the road and set on fire, but otherwise the withdrawal through **Lamia** to the **Thermopylae** line was completed without further trouble.

¹ **2 Panzer Division** war diary, 21 April, with note about events of 20 April.

² *Von Serbien bis Kreta (From Serbia to Crete)*, prepared by a German publicity unit in **Greece**, 1942, p. 90. Translated.

³ **Sgt C. H. Harper**, MM; born **Auckland**, 8 Apr 1918; ship repairer; died of wounds 30 Nov 1941.

⁴ **2 Lt M. C. Hill**, MC; born **Wellington**, 11 Jul 1913; assurance clerk; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

TO GREECE

ANZAC CORPS ASSEMBLES ON THE THERMOPYLAE LINE

Anzac Corps assembles on the Thermopylae Line

Actually **Lee Force** was not the last of **W Force** to reach the **Thermopylae** line. All through 20 April several New Zealand detachments were out along the coast road to and beyond **Stilis**. In the morning **A Troop 25 Battery 4 Field Regiment** was sent round to check enemy tanks which were expected to come through from **Volos**, but the CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton, sent the troop back to Anthili, where with **C Company 20 Battalion** (less a platoon to protect demolition parties) it went into an anti-tank position covering the highway south from **Lamia**. The engineer officers and their respective groups remained about **Stilis** to complete the demolitions. Second-Lieutenant **Wells**¹ of **6 Field Company** dealt with the bridge over the ravine at Pelasyia; Lieutenants **Hector** and **Lindell**² from **7 Field Company** with the launches and sailing craft along the coast as far as **Stilis**; and in the little port itself **Captain Woolcott**³ with a party from **6 Field Company** smashed up the boats along the waterfront. All parties, engineers and supporting troops then withdrew, firing minor road demolitions and leaving the **Volos–Lamia** road to the enemy.

The same day engineers from **7 Field Company** had gone back to **Lamia**, where they collected engines and rolling stock and brought two trains south beyond **Thermopylae**. There had been a third train but Australian engineers, probably working to a timetable, demolished a viaduct before it was clear of the town. The train was run into the river below and the engineers tramped back towards the defences. Unfortunately they were thought to be German patrols, the infantry opened fire and it was not until next morning that they could establish their identity.

Finally, there was the recovery of survivors from **Allen Force** who might have reached the coast near **Volos**. On the night of 21–22 April

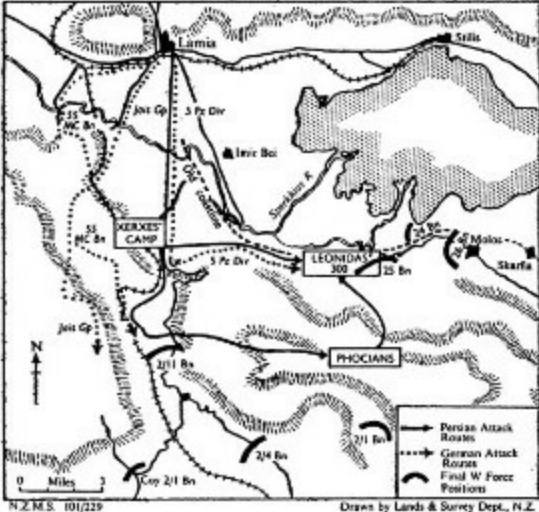
Captain Woolcott with his demolition party set out from **Atalandi** in a small diesel-engined fishing launch and picked up on the north-west corner of **Euboea Island** two Australians and six members of 21 Battalion.

South of the rearguards, **Anzac Corps** had been assembling behind the Sperkhios River, the New Zealand Division in the narrow strip between the sea and the mountains known as the pass of **Thermopylae** and 6 Australian Division on the range to the west about **Brallos Pass**. In classical times the entrance to the coastal gap

¹ **Capt J. O. Wells**; Horotiu, **Waikato**; born **Wellington**, 14 Sep 1909; structural engineer; p.w. Apr 1941.

² **Maj G. A. Lindell**, DSO, OBE, ED; **Wellington**; born **Taihape**, 26 Nov 1906; engineer; **7 Fd Coy** 1940–41; Adjt, NZ Div Engrs, 1941–42; SSO Engrs, Army HQ, 1943–44; **OC 7 Fd Coy** 1944–46; twice wounded; CRE NZ Div (Lt-Col) 1953–55.

³ **Maj H. C. S. Woolcott**; born **Auckland**, 29 May 1909; civil engineer; wounded 1 Dec 1941; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.



THE THERMOPYLAE BATTLEFIELD, 480 BC AND 1941

THE THERMOPYLAE BATTLEFIELD, 480 BC AND 1941

had been narrow, but the silt brought down by the Sperkhios River had extended it some five miles to the east. Between the road and the sea there were now swamps and sodden fields. But the blue sulphurous stream still flowed from **Thermopylae** and to the west there were still the scrub-covered ridges and the precipitous water-courses below the grey, forbidding cliffs. To the rear again, beyond the village of **Molos** with its plane trees and its grape vines, there were fields of corn and magnificent olive groves, and then the narrowest strip of all with the blue sea on the one side and 500-foot cliffs on the other.

The Australians held the range which runs westwards into the interior. It was high and remarkable for its pinnacles and precipices, for the dense undergrowth on the hillsides, for the stunted oaks in the gullies, the world of pines about **Brallos Pass** and the narrow highway winding south to **Thebes**. Below it and to the west lay the deep gorge of the Asopos River through which the railway disappears into tunnels ¹ or edges round buttressed embankments.

¹ See p. 472.

In 480 BC Xerxes, the Persian, unable to force the coastal gap, had sent his Immortals into the Asopos Gorge. Thence, after a short distance, they had turned eastwards up the ridges and through the groves of oak to surprise the Phocian sentries and outflank the forces of Leonidas, the Spartan king. In April 1941, with the Australians holding **Brallos Pass**, there was no danger of another surprise attack by this route, but the natural advantages of the **Thermopylae– Brallos** line could still be seriously threatened. If the Germans were able to seize the island of Euboea they could outflank the New Zealand sector. Should they circle through the mountains to the west they could come in behind the Australians by way of the secondary roads to Gravia and Amfissa, or, if they followed the roads from Epirus, they could turn in along the north coast of the Gulf of **Corinth** towards Amfissa and Delphi. Much therefore depended upon the resistance of the Greeks along this western flank.

The task for the moment, however, was the preparation of new defences. The orders received verbally from **Anzac Corps** at **Levadhia** on the morning of 19 April were that the New Zealand Division should prepare to defend the pass at **Thermopylae**, and Brigadier Puttick, as the senior officer in the area, had instructed 5 Brigade to take up a position covering the whole front. Twenty-first Battalion had been shattered at the **Pinios Gorge** and 22 Battalion had been troubled by the diversion near **Pharsala**, but the greater part of the brigade had reached the area and had been able to rest and reorganise. Twenty-eighth Battalion therefore moved to the **Ay Trias** area on the right flank near the coast; 22 Battalion went to the west of **Molos**; and 23 Battalion to the left of the sector but not as yet to the steep positions east of **Brallos Pass**.

In the narrow strip between the sea and the hot springs at **Thermopylae** 6 Field Regiment, which had come back with 4 Brigade Group, deployed to cover the road from **Lamia**. The other regiments of artillery, having been dispersed to support several different formations, had to be organised as they came in. In the meantime the CRA, Brigadier Miles, collected all the artillerymen he could find and organised temporary anti-tank defences with groups of 25-pounders and two-pounders along the highway between **Thermopylae** and **Molos**. Through this line his detachments came in from the north: 25 Battery 4 Field Regiment with **Savige Force** from **Kalabaka**; 26 Battery with **Allen Force** from **Tempe**; 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment, less A Troop, with 6 Brigade from **Elasson**; and finally 28 Battery, less F Troop with 6 Brigade, from the **Larisa** airfield.

Late that afternoon, 19 April, **General Freyberg** took command and was able to report to Headquarters **W Force** that his division had successfully withdrawn. Twenty-first Battalion was 'in a bad way' but the move had been completed more successfully than had been expected. Twenty-fourth and 25th Battalions were coming in from the **Volos** area and 26 Battalion was completing its train journey to the rear of the Australian lines. Trucks were still turning off from the long convoys and a general sorting out of troops was still taking place. But it was often

difficult to locate units for some had been directed to areas far behind the line, Divisional Headquarters, for instance, having been sent by Anzac Corps to Longos, well back from the forward area.

TO GREECE

THE NEW ZEALAND SECTOR

The New Zealand Sector

Next morning, 20 April, **General Freyberg** discussed with his senior officers the defences of the **Thermopylae** sector. The **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** and supporting troops were to go forward, keeping in touch with the enemy and acting as a screen behind which demolitions could be prepared. But the move never took place; the demolitions were complete by nightfall and a covering force was unnecessary. The divisional sector was to extend westwards from **Ay Trias** to the hairpin bend on the **Brallos Pass** road and the line was to have been along the **Sperkhios River**, which would be held by infantry fire at night and by artillery during the day. Here, too, there had to be some adjustments. As the marshy flats from the **Sperkhios River** to **Ay Trias** were largely untenable by infantry, the forward line was forced back to the edge of the high country and south of the small stream running parallel to the river. The basis of the defence system had, therefore, to be the observed fire of the artillery and, as the gun positions could be encircled by a landing on the coast, the occupied area had to be extended far to the rear. As a result it was decided that in the forward area 6 Brigade would be on the right, 5 Brigade on the left; in reserve and watching the coast for possible landings would be 4 Brigade and the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**.

That afternoon and night, 20–21 April, adjustments were made. **Twenty-fourth Battalion** moved up to the **Ay Trias** area with its right flank on the nearby coast; **22 Battalion** came up to the left and **28 (Maori) Battalion**, the original occupant of the area, moved to a sector west of **Thermopylae** and facing north towards the road.

Still farther west, **23 Battalion** had been in the area overlooking the bridge across the **Sperkhios River**, but it now had to make several laborious adjustments to cover the gap which had been left between the

left flank of the New Zealand Division and the right flank of 6 Australian Division. In the end B Company was astride the road to the south of the bridge; A Company was on the spur to the south and C Company in the high country to the west. D Company, which had been transported at dusk across the front and back up the pass road, was in the rough country just east of the great bend. Once the bridge over the Sperkhios River was blown this company would be cut off from the rest of the battalion; the only line of approach would then be the mile of donkey track from the crest of **Brallos Pass** in the Australian sector. Finally, late that night the bridge across the Sperkhios River was wrecked ¹ by 7 Field Company, reports having come through that the Germans had entered **Lamia**. ²

The same day the artillery plan was prepared by Brigadier Miles. Unable to use the marshland near the coast, the regiments were to be on the edge of the high ground west and south of **Molos**. This meant that the guns to cover the bridge in the 23 Battalion sector would have to be almost in the front line and that the main road west of that from **Lamia** to **Brallos Pass** could not be brought under fire. Moreover, the majority of the gun positions, unless carefully camouflaged, would be in full view of the enemy across the gulf. On the other hand the highway would be covered by all the regiments of artillery, British and New Zealand.

The sector was then divided into two zones, anti-tank and field. In the first or western zone to the front of the ridge held by 23 Battalion, K Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery had one gun looking directly north to the Alamanas bridge and the other three along the road past the baths towards **Molos**. The two guns of L Troop— all that remained of 33 Battery—were on the ridge overlooking the road just to the east of K Troop. Continuing the line to **Thermopylae** was 31 Anti-Tank Battery— with only seven guns— one troop on the low marsh ground near the sea and the others on the lower slopes of the 25 Battalion area.

Fifth Field Regiment, which had occupied emergency positions since its arrival on 19 April, now moved to new positions on 21 April. One

troop with another 25-pounder under command and E Troop 32 Anti-Tank Battery went to the area between the baths at **Thermopylae** and the foothills. Another battery was responsible for the remainder of the zone, with its rear boundary at the stream running south to north near **Ay Trias**. To the rear 32 Anti-Tank Battery, less E Troop, provided anti-tank defence about Divisional Headquarters.

¹ Very little time would have been needed to repair it. The following night, 21–22 April, four of the brigade Bren carriers covered the bridge while Lt Hector with a small party from 7 Field Company completed the demolition.

² See map on p. 385.

The anti-tank zone was strengthened about **Ay Trias** when 102 Anti-Tank Regiment, which had been with 1 Armoured Brigade, returned from **Thebes** on the night of 20–21 April. B Battery was between the foothills and the coast; C and D Batteries, now only six guns, remained at **Longos** as a mobile reserve. C and F Troops 5 Field Regiment moved in the same night, C Troop placing one section just off the secondary road connecting **Ay Trias** with the highway and the other between the village and the coast. F Troop, which had originally been with the main body of 5 Field Regiment, had been sent back to the area when it was discovered that the flat, apparently swampy country west of **Ay Trias** could possibly be traversed by tanks. The guns were put in behind D Company 25 Battalion facing **Ay Trias**, but with the left-hand gun on a spur from which it could cover several stretches of the main road in front of 25 Battalion.

The field and medium artillery had already fixed and camouflaged their gun positions. On 19 April 4 Field Regiment had hastily occupied positions at Kammena Vourla, but it was now farther forward in a dry stream bed nearer **Molos**. The same day 6 Field Regiment had moved into positions near **Molos**, but since then it, too, had made several changes. To avoid dead positions, especially on the left flank towards

the road to **Brallos Pass**, and to limit the areas exposed to fire from across the gulf, D and F Troops in that order were now in a small valley just east of D Company 25 Battalion.

Second Royal Horse Artillery Regiment had been moving back with the rest of the 1 Armoured Brigade group from **Atalandi** when orders were received to join the New Zealand Division. When turning about it suffered air attacks and seems to have spent 21 April under cover, but next morning one battery was in the Cape Knimis area in an anti-tank role and the other battery in an area south-east of **Molos**. The guns of 64 Medium Regiment went into position on 21 April, with two troops four miles east of **Molos** and one troop well back 15 miles east of the village. The 234th Battery, less C Troop, remained with 7 Medium Regiment in the Kifissokhori area.

In the **Brallos Pass** area to the west of the New Zealand sector were the Australian brigades. On 18 April 2/4 and 2/8 Battalions of 19 Brigade had come back from the **Dhomokos** area; next day and night 2/1 and 2/5 Battalions had come through with Savige Force from the **Kalabaka** area and the remnants of 2/2 and 2/3 Battalions had straggled in from the **Pinios Gorge**. After some adjustment, the position by the end of 21 April was that 19 Brigade extended westwards from the New Zealand sector to the main highway, beyond which 17 Brigade covered the deep gorge and the country to the west of it, in all about six miles. In reserve was 16 Brigade, with the responsibility of defending the roads through the mountains from the west.

Another problem for **W Force** was the defence of the east coast. There was always the possibility of the enemy crossing to the island of Euboea and moving south to the swing bridge at **Khalkis** well behind the New Zealand lines. In the original plan 1 Armoured Brigade was to have protected this flank but its units were not available. Third Royal Tank Regiment with its few remaining tanks had been sent to the **Athens** area for local defence; 4 Hussars was still about **Thebes**, but the majority of its tanks had been lost on the long withdrawal from **Macedonia**; and 1

Rangers, which was still recovering from the engagement at **Vevi**, had an anti-parachute role near Force Headquarters at **Thebes**. Consequently the only unit sent to **Khalkis** was 155 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, which then came under the command of the New Zealand Division.

On 21 April the threat became more serious, particularly when the Greeks informed Headquarters **Anzac Corps** that German troops had landed on the north end of Euboea. **Freyberg** was ordered to send his **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment to the island; **1 Rangers** was to hold **Khalkis** bridge; and a New Zealand battalion was to take up an anti-parachute role east of **Thebes**. The orders for the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment were not immediately put into operation, probably because **Freyberg** preferred to guard the flank from the mainland and perhaps because the vehicles of the unit all required workshop attention. As for the other moves, they were delayed once it was known that evacuation was pending.

The last and most obvious problem was the almost complete absence of air cover. Using the landing grounds about **Larisa**, the *Luftwaffe* had been ruthlessly bombing and machine-gunning the convoys along the highway and the more important assembly areas to the rear. The headquarters of both **Anzac Corps** at **Levadhia** and **W Force** at **Thebes** were bombed and the telephone system disrupted. Working parties had often to break for cover but the casualties throughout the Division were surprisingly light, a single bomb in the 22 Battalion area causing the heaviest casualties—six killed and five wounded.

The outstanding effort of the day was probably that of Driver **Macdonald**,¹ who had been sent with others of the Supply Column to find some urgently needed petrol. Three trainloads of petrol, shells and anti-tank mines had eventually been located at **Levadhia**, but in the early morning when the trucks were being loaded Stukas

¹ **Dvr J. G. Macdonald**, MM; born **Oamaru**, 18 Jun 1909; clerk; killed in action May 1941.

had come screaming down towards the railway yard. Petrol trucks were hit and soon ablaze; the flames spread to other trucks and heavy shells began to explode. Macdonald and Sergeant H. Killalea of the Australian Corps of Signals thereupon dashed to the only engine in sight, discovered how to operate it and shunted into safety twenty-eight trucks loaded with petrol, oil and ammunition.

To check these raids there was little that the **Royal Air Force** could do. The Wellington bombers had been flown to Egypt on 17–18 April; the Blenheims after 19 April were taking key airmen to **Crete** or operating from there to protect the convoys as they came in from **Greece**.

The fighter squadrons which had done their best to protect the columns as they came south from **Larisa** were still using Menidi and **Elevisis**, the airfields near **Athens**, but they now had an impossible task. On 20 April a formation of Me110s slipped through and damaged a dozen Blenheims at Menidi; on three other occasions the fighters beat off the enemy; and then in the afternoon nearly a hundred German aircraft attempted to bomb **Piræus**. At least eight were destroyed and two damaged, but five of the fifteen Hurricanes which intercepted them were shot down. Such odds were obviously too great, so on 22 April the remaining Gladiators were sent to **Crete** and the fifteen Hurricanes to the Greek training airfield at **Argos**. From there they could possibly cover the movement of troops about the evacuation beaches to the west and south of **Athens**.

TO GREECE

ADJUSTMENTS TO THE LINE, 21 APRIL, AND NIGHT 21-22 APRIL

Adjustments to the Line, 21 April, and Night 21-22 April

In the New Zealand sector on 21 April the troops were hastily digging in, camouflaging and preparing barbed-wire entanglements across the front. Changes were still being made to adjust the line so that each brigade should have two battalions forward and one in reserve, but this meant further movement for several units.

On the right flank 24 Battalion, which had already moved forward, was now well established about **Ay Trias**, a deserted village with spring vegetables and abandoned poultry. The line ran roughly north and south from the sea to the **Lamia- Molos** road. Three companies, A, B and C, held from the coast to the road, while D Company was in reserve behind C Company and just south of the highway. Twenty-fifth Battalion now came up from the **Molos** area to take over the area in which 22 Battalion had been preparing positions and linking up the left flank of 6 Brigade with the right flank of 5 Brigade. All six platoons of D and B Companies were in line along the hills. A Company was at right angles to the road, with 9 Platoon astride it and 8 and 7 Platoons on the south side towards the hills.

Twenty-sixth Battalion, which had just come through ¹ by motor transport from the Australian sector, was in brigade reserve to the west of **Molos** with its Bren carriers patrolling the coast between 24 Battalion and 4 Brigade.

Farther west in the 5 Brigade sector there was similar haste in the preparation of the line and in the movement of units. Twenty-second Battalion had moved forward for the third time and was now between 25 and 28 (Maori) Battalions. The Maoris, assisted by a company from 18 Battalion, were wiring and preparing slit trenches and enjoying the bath houses alongside the upper reaches of the **Thermopylae** stream. And on

the extreme left 23 Battalion was busily settling down. The Australians had taken over the great bend in the road below **Brallos Pass**, leaving D Company free to join A Company and to assist in the packing of wire and supplies up the steep slopes.

As 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion had reassembled after the withdrawal from the north, companies were allocated to support all units: 3 Company with 6 Brigade; 4 Company with 5 Brigade; 1 Company, less a platoon, with 4 Brigade; and 2 Company, less a platoon, in Divisional Reserve. The detached platoons were about the **Longos** headland with a beach-watching role.

In the forward areas the situation throughout the day gradually became more tense. German vehicles could be seen entering **Lamia** and late that afternoon the Australian artillery on the **Brallos Pass** road opened fire on transport moving south towards the Sperkhios River.

About the same time two motor-cyclists rode confidently up to the demolished bridge which was picketed by the carrier platoon. One German was killed, the other captured. They were from *8 Potsdam Reconnaissance Unit (5 Panzer Division)*, of which one company had entered **Lamia** about midday. The main body of the division was still strung out along the highway, but after dark the lights in the distant hills showed that hundreds of vehicles were approaching the town.

There was also much movement behind the New Zealand lines, where 4 Brigade was preparing to take over its task of coast-watching and anti-parachute defence in the rear areas. At dusk 20 Battalion moved to the stretch between Karia and **Cape Knimis**, 19 Battalion began to move south-east of **Molos** and 18 Battalion went to the south of Skarfia. These moves were being made when orders were received for one battalion to be sent immediately to a dispersal area four miles west of **Levadhia**. From there it would reconnoitre defensive positions in the Delphi Pass. No reasons were given and no record can be found, but it is probable that the news of the Greek surrender in Epirus forced this move to cover the extreme left flank. Whatever it was, 19 Battalion in the hastily collected

trucks of the Ammunition Company was taken that night to [Levadhia](#).

¹ See [p. 310](#).

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 16 – THE EVACUATION FROM GREECE BEGINS

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TO GREECE

THE DECISION TO EVACUATE

The Decision to Evacuate

IN the period of the withdrawal to **Thermopylae** the overall situation in the **Middle East** had been changing rapidly for the worse. Once the Germans had entered Belgrade on 13 April it had been clear to the authorities in **Cairo** that the **Balkan** front was about to collapse. Next day the **New Zealand Government** was told that because of the critical condition in **Cyrenaica** the **Polish Brigade** and 7 Australian Division could not be sent to **Greece**. Fearing the worst, it immediately suggested that preparations be made for the possible evacuation of **W Force**.

As it happened Wavell, when in **Greece** on 11–13 April, had warned ¹ Wilson that he must expect no reinforcements and had authorised de Guingand to discuss evacuation plans with certain responsible officers. This had been a wise precaution for Wavell, Cunningham and Longmore on 15 April were ‘forced to the conclusion that the only possible course was to withdraw the British troops from **Greece**.’ ² They could not at this stage adopt or even mention this course of action. The suggestion had to come from the **Greek Government**.

The following day General Papagos made the first move when he suggested ³ to General Wilson that **W Force** should be withdrawn. This brought matters to a head. Wilson informed Middle East Headquarters and on 17 April Rear-Admiral H. T. Baillie- Grohman was sent to **Greece** to prepare for the evacuation. In **Athens** a Joint Planning Staff was formed and reconnaissance parties were sent to report on the more suitable beaches.

When informed of the Greek proposal Mr Churchill on 17 April had replied:

We cannot remain in **Greece** against wish of Greek Commander-in-

Chief, and thus expose country to devastation. Wilson or Palairret should obtain endorsement by **Greek Government** of Papagos's request. Consequent upon this assent, evacuation should proceed, without however prejudicing any

¹ See pp. 215– 16.

² See p. 116; Cunningham, p. 352.

³ See pp. 233– 4.

withdrawal to **Thermopylae** position in co-operation with the Greek Army. You will naturally try to save as much material as possible. ¹

In **Athens** the situation was fast approaching a crisis. An unofficial order to the army in **Albania** had given certain troops Easter leave and they were now in the city 'bewildered and angry.' ² There was a suggestion that the King and his Government should depart for **Crete**. And on 18 April **M. Koryzis** committed suicide 'after telling the King that he felt that he had failed him in the task entrusted to him.' ³

At the same time General Wilson, owing to the frequent changes in location of his headquarters and the unreliability of the wireless communications in the mountains, was not always able to supply the information required by the authorities in both **Cairo** and **London**. 'For this I was taken severely to task by our Prime Minister, who often referred subsequently to this deficiency on my part.' ⁴ Nor could he always be definite. On 18 April Wilson first stated that his force could fight on for another month and then doubted if his units would be in position to hold the **Thermopylae** line.

The problems of Air Chief Marshal Longmore were just as formidable; his resources were quite inadequate for the demands now being made upon them. So that day in **London**, as a result of his request for guidance, the relative importance of the many problems of the **Middle**

East was at last clearly stated. In a directive sent by Mr Churchill and endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff the Commanders-in-Chief in the **Middle East** were advised that, though the future of **W Force** affected the whole Empire, 'victory in **Libya** counts first, evacuation of troops from **Greece** second.' Shipping to **Tobruk**, unless indispensable to victory, had to be supplied when convenient; **Iraq** could be 'ignored and **Crete** ... worked up later.' ⁵

Evacuation now seemed inevitable but there was as yet no suggestion of haste. Wavell advised Wilson that if **W Force** could itself securely hold the **Thermopylae** line there was no reason to hasten the evacuation. Unless the political situation forced an early withdrawal the line should be held for some time and the enemy forced to fight. Attention could then be given to the work in **Crete**, the defence of Egypt could be strengthened and the evacuation plans could be prepared without too much haste.

Nevertheless, much organisation was necessary. Small craft had to be chartered and fitted out to ferry the troops from the beaches to the ships; to provide the beach parties the ship's company from

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 200.

² The Prime Minister, **M. Koryzis**, 'accused the minister of war of the treachery ... he demanded the return of the men to the front and cancelled arrangements for the Government's departure to **Crete**.'—Laird Archer, *Balkan Journal*, pp. 180–3; Wilson, p. 93.

³ Cable, 19 April, Dominions Office to Prime Ministers of **Australia** and New Zealand.

⁴ Wilson, p. 92.

⁵ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 201.

the cruiser **York** abandoned its salvage work in **Suda Bay**; and the **Navy**, in spite of its responsibilities in the **Mediterranean**, had to adjust the movements of shipping according to the Army's requirements.

Meanwhile in **Athens** General Wilson had attended a conference with the King, General Papagos, Sir Michael Palairret (British Minister), Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac, Rear-Admiral Turle and some members of the Greek Cabinet. They had discussed the military situation and whether it was advisable for the British to 'hold on or evacuate', the political situation and the defeatism that 'was now getting widespread.' ¹

The results of this discussion were given to General Wavell, who arrived in **Athens** the next day, 19 April, and immediately conferred with General Wilson to consider the future action of **W Force** and to decide whether the British troops should or should not evacuate **Greece**. 'The arguments in favour of fighting it out, which [it] is always better to do if possible, were: the tying up of enemy forces, army and air, which would result therefrom; the strain the evacuation would place on the Navy and Merchant Marine; the effect on the morale of the troops and the loss of equipment which would be incurred. In favour of withdrawal the arguments were: the question as to whether our forces in **Greece** could be reinforced as this was essential; the question of the maintenance of our forces, plus the feeding of the civil population; the weakness of our air forces with few airfields and little prospect of receiving reinforcements; the little hope of the Greek Army being able to recover its morale.' ² Furthermore, the support of an army in **Greece** could so weaken the force in the **Western Desert** that its position could be precarious. Thus it was a case of sentiment versus facts, with instinct suggesting a fight to a finish and reason pointing out that the shortage of food and air cover were really the decisive factors. The decision was therefore made to withdraw from **Greece**. Evacuation would start on the night of 28–29 April and, with the destruction about **Piræus** harbour and the limitations of smaller ports, the general feeling was that the **Navy** would be fortunate if it 'embarked 30% of the force.' ³

The same day another conference was held at Tatoï Palace outside Athens. With no Prime Minister and no one willing to

¹ Wilson, p. 93. J. Hetherington, *Blamey*, p. 104, gives a note from Wilson to Blamey dated 19 April. 'I found things in Athens very bad yesterday. At a conference with the King and Papagos the latter has lost heart and is adopting the attitude what can do Wavell is coming over today, as we are faced with difficult decisions. Yesterday the Greeks were asking us to evacuate the country as soon as possible, but I hope by today they may not be of that mind and will join with us to fight the Germans....'

² Wilson, pp. 93-4.

³ Report of meeting held on 18 April.

assume that responsibility, the King was 'now acting as head of his Government.'¹ Those present included the group who attended the previous day together with General Wavell and General Mazarakis, a leader of the Venizelist Republican party, who had taken little part in public life after the dictatorship of Metaxas had been established in 1935.

The discussion was opened by General Wavell, who said that the British Army would fight as long as the Greek Army fought. However, if the Greek Government so desired it, the British forces would withdraw.² Papagos then described the situation so far as the Greeks were concerned: the morale of the forces was weakening; the maintenance of both troops and refugees would soon be a serious problem. The British Minister followed with a message from Mr Churchill stating that if the British left Greece it must be with the consent of the Greek King and Government. After further discussion General Mazarakis decided that 'he had been called in too late to retrieve the situation and that evacuation was the best solution.'³ This, the obvious conclusion, was accepted by

all present. The actual decision was not officially made until the next day. A new government had to be formed and the King wanted some final statement about the morale of the Army of Epirus.

In London Mr Churchill was still confident:

I am increasingly of the opinion that if the generals on the spot think they can hold on in the **Thermopylae** position for a fortnight or three weeks, and can keep the Greek Army fighting, or enough of it, we should certainly support them, if the Dominions will agree. I do not believe the difficulty of evacuation will increase if the enemy suffers heavy losses. On the other hand, every day the **German Air Force** is detained in **Greece** enables the Libyan situation to be stabilised, and may enable us to bring in the extra tanks (to **Tobruk**). If this is accomplished safely and the **Tobruk** position holds, we might even feel strong enough to reinforce from Egypt. I am most reluctant to see us quit, and if the troops were British only and the matter could be decided on military grounds alone I would urge Wilson to fight if he thought it possible. Anyhow, before we commit ourselves to evacuation the case must be put squarely to the Dominions after to-morrow's Cabinet. Of course, I do not know the conditions in which our retreating forces will reach the new key position. ⁴

Unfortunately the situation in **Greece** no longer justified such determination. On 19 April the Germans, having forced the Pinios Gorge, were through **Larisa** and endeavouring to overtake the British columns along the roads to **Volos** and **Lamia**. The SS '*Adolf Hitler*' *Division* had been diverted from **Grevena** and sent across

¹ Wavell's despatch covering the period 7 February–15 July 1941.

² Palaret cabled his opinion to **London** next day that it was unfair to place the onus of decision on the Greeks.

³ Wilson, p. 95.

⁴ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 202.

the **Metsovon Pass** in the direction of Ioannina to cover the flank of **12 Army** and to isolate the Greeks on the western side of the Pindhos Mountains. The appearance of this force to the rear of the **Army of Epirus** and close to the Greek headquarters at Ioannina was decisive. With the support of two other corps commanders, General Tsolakoglou of 3 Army Corps (Western Macedonian Army) deposed the Army Commander and on 20 April opened the negotiations for an armistice. Next day at **Larisa** the terms were discussed and the treaty duly signed. ¹

Meanwhile, on the night of 20–21 April Wavell had driven north to Blamey's headquarters in the **Levadhia** area and explained the situation.

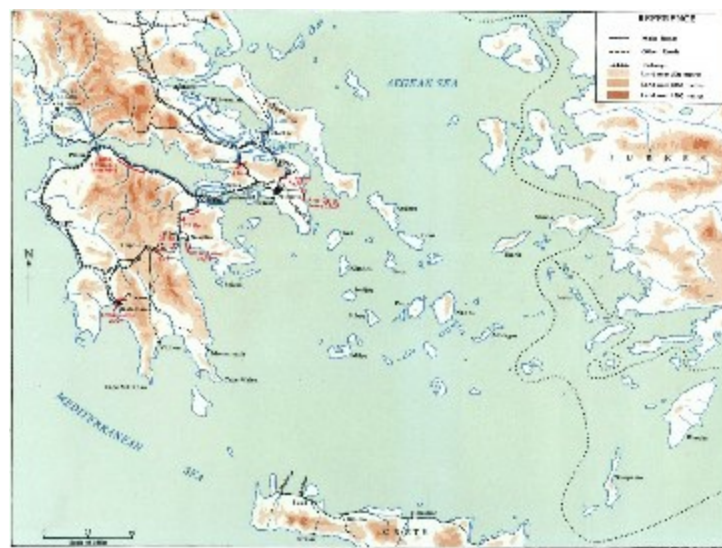
He then returned to **Athens**, where on 21 April he met the King and his new Prime Minister, **M. Tsouderos**. The officer who had been sent to report on the conditions in Epirus had not yet returned, but the King admitted that there was no Greek force to protect the left flank of the British lines at **Thermopylae**. Wavell thereupon announced that he would have to attempt the evacuation of W Force. The King agreed, promising all possible support and generously apologising for the disaster. After the meeting the Greek premier, through Sir Michael Palaret, thanked the British Government and **W Force** for their efforts to help **Greece**. The Greek Army was now exhausted, and as conditions did not justify any further sacrifice **W Force** should, in the interests of the common cause, be immediately withdrawn.

The same day, 21 April, Wavell, in confirmation of verbal instructions, sent his written orders to Wilson. He was free to select the date for the beginning of the evacuation and he must take Generals Blamey and **Freyberg** fully into his confidence; the troops were to be taken either to **Crete** or to Egypt; close touch had to be kept with the

Greek Government and so far as was possible any Greek personnel desired by the **Greek Government** should be embarked. The order also stated:

Should part of the original scheme fail or should portions of the force become cut off, they must not surrender but should endeavour to make their way into the **Peloponnese** or into any of the adjacent islands. It may well be possible to rescue parties from the **Peloponnese** at some considerably later date. You should bear in mind the possibility of later being able to evacuate transport, guns, etc., from the Southern Peloponnesian ports or beaches.

Almost immediately the plans had to be changed. News came through that day of the surrender of the Greek armies in Epirus. The western flank of the **Thermopylae** position was now wide



Southern Greece. Situation on 26 April 1941 after German Paratroop landings at **Corinth**

¹ As the Italians demanded a formal surrender from the Greeks the negotiations were reopened, and on 23 April at **Salonika** the treaty was confirmed by a new protocol which also included a treaty with the Italians.

open; it was even possible that the Germans might cross the Gulf of **Corinth** to the **Peloponnese**. The German radio was already announcing

that the British force in Greece was facing another Dunkirk. Wilson, after consultation with Rear-Admiral Baillie- Grohman, decided that the evacuation originally set for the night of 28–29 April must begin on 24–25 April, the earliest possible night. So, late on the night of 21 April, they met Blamey on the roadside near Thebes and told him that he would have to conduct the withdrawal. The detailed arrangements would be made by Headquarters W Force.

TO GREECE

MEDICAL AND BASE UNITS LEAVE THE ATHENS AREA, 22-25 APRIL

Medical and Base Units leave the Athens Area, 22-25 April

In **Athens** the **King of Greece** announced that the **Government** would leave for **Crete** and from there continue the war. The troops were told of the decision to evacuate **Greece**; movement orders were prepared; arrangements were made for the Greeks to have the supply depot and for the **American Red Cross** to take over the canteen stores; and the **Military Attaché** at **Athens** began to tour the **Peloponnese** to make plans for the Greeks to assist any **British** troops who might not be evacuated.

No time was wasted; in fact some of the **New Zealand** base units had already moved out. On 19 April 1 **General Hospital** ¹ had received its orders: the nurses would leave for **Egypt** in a hospital ship within a few hours; thirty orderlies must be sent to 26 **General Hospital** at **Voula**; and all the other male staff, less the five officers ² already at **Voula**, would leave **Piræus** that afternoon in the *MV Rawnsley*.

The vessel left that evening with some 600 **British** base troops and the medical group: **Colonel McKillop**, with 14 officers and 69 other ranks. But it missed the convoy and next morning, when standing by for instructions, was bombed and machine-gunned. The **British** had several casualties but they were transferred to the hospital ship *Aba*, and the *Rawnsley* carried on to reach **Alexandria** on 23 April.

The nurses, accompanied by **Captains Sayers** ³ and **King**, ⁴ took

¹ See pp. 228– 9.

² See pp. 229, 369, 408– 12.

³ **Col E. G. Sayers**, CMG, Legion of Merit (US); Dunedin; born

Christchurch, 10 Sep 1902; physician; **1 Gen Hosp** 1940–41; in charge medical division **1 Gen Hosp**, Aug 1941–Sep 1942; **4 Gen Hosp**, Oct 1942–Sep 1943; Consultant Physician **2 NZEF** (IP) 1943–44; CO **4 Gen Hosp** Nov 1943–Aug 1944; Dean of University of Otago Medical School.

⁴ **Brig R. D. King**, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Greek Medallion for Distinguished Deed; **Timaru**; born **Timaru**, 25 Feb 1896; medical practitioner; **1 NZEF** 1918–19 (Private, **NZMC**); physician **1 Gen Hosp** Feb 1940–Jun 1941; CO **4 Fd Amb** Jan 1942–Jun 1943; ADMS 2 NZ Div Jun 1943–Dec 1944; DDMS NZ Corps Feb–Mar 1944.

much longer to leave **Greece**. No orders were received for the expected move on 19 April, but next day 1 officer and 32 nurses— of the fifty-two concerned—were sent to join the *Aba*, but it had already put out from **Piræus** to avoid the air attacks. The party returned to **Kifisia** and waited for further instructions. ¹

On the night of 21–22 April the New Zealand liaison officer at Headquarters British Troops in **Greece**, **Athens**, Major N. A. Rattray, had attended a conference with the naval staff and Brigadier Brunskill. The evacuation plan had been outlined and Rattray had been instructed to move the base units from **Athens** and the medical group from **Voula**. The officers of the Base Pay Office (Captain **Morris** ²) and Advanced 2 Echelon (Second- Lieutenant **Morton** ³) had been awakened just before midnight and given orders to join immediately the convoy which would be leaving that same night from the Reinforcement Camp at **Voula**, a village south-east along the coast from **Piræus**.

Shortly after midnight the authorities in the camp, Major **MacDuff** ⁴ and his adjutant, Lieutenant **Curtis**, ⁵ were given similar instructions by Major Rattray. Several groups were soon packing equipment and preparing to move out in half an hour's time. Among them were the staff and patients of the temporary Convalescent Hospital, the **Mobile Dental Unit** encamped nearby, some members of the Divisional Postal Unit (Second-Lieutenant **Harbott** ⁶), the Convalescent Hospital (Captain **Slater**

7) and many convalescents recently discharged from the hospital to the reinforcement group.

The convoy left under the command of Captain Ritchie ⁸ (Divisional Cavalry Regiment), whose instructions seem to have been very brief: move towards Corinth and the Peloponnese. This was simple enough once the highway was reached, for the main stream of traffic was now rattling westwards out of Athens. There was some confusion and an hour's delay in the narrow streets of Eleusis, but at dawn the trucks were skirting the coast and approaching Megara. The convoy was then diverted by Movement

¹ See p. 404.

² Capt W. C. Morris; Hamilton; born Opunake, 16 Aug 1911; accountant; p.w. 25 Apr 1941.

³ Capt C. A. Morton, MBE; Auckland; born Eketahuna, 26 Nov 1908; school-teacher.

⁴ Maj A. P. MacDuff, ED, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Timaru, 29 Aug 1906; commercial traveller; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁵ Capt D. Curtis; Te Puke; born Christchurch, 12 May 1917; Regular soldier; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁶ Maj H. S. Harbott, MBE, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ 4 Mar 1902; wounded 25 Apr 1941.

⁷ Capt A. N. Slater; Wellington; born Dunedin, 13 Nov 1900; medical practitioner; medical officer 4 Fd Amb Oct 1939–Jan 1941; 1 Gen Hosp Jan–Apr 1941; p.w. Apr 1941; repatriated Jun 1944.

⁸ Maj J. A. D. Ritchie; Wellington; born NZ 14 May 1898;

importer.

Control authorities into the olive groves to the east of the village; the troops took cover and the lorries were ordered back to **Athens**.

Here they waited for further orders from 80 Base Sub-Area and in peacetime would have remarked upon the sound of sheep bells and the enchanting countryside. On the outskirts of **Megara** the land sloped south to the minute coastal plain and north into a long valley thick with olive trees. The cemetery with its tall cypress trees was to the left, the dusty village faced south across fields red with poppies to the blue **Mediterranean** and the island of Salamis. To the west beyond the road above the cliffs there was the mass of the **Peloponnese**, range behind range, in a soft blue haze.

As it was, the *Luftwaffe* dominated the scene, patrolling the highway and making all movement by day extremely dangerous. That night, 22–23 April, a train came through from **Athens** with Australian troops, drafts of convalescents from the British hospitals and several New Zealanders, including the seven ¹ **YMCA** secretaries who had been working with the line-of-communication units and at the Base Reception Camp at **Voula**. Once again the Greek villagers offered eggs and brown bread—and once again the day was spent sheltering from observation aircraft and dive-bombers. But there were nearly 1200 men in the area, many of them convalescents or walking wounded still needing attention. Captain Slater went back to **Athens** for medical supplies and three of the **YMCA** secretaries returned to **Voula**, where they salvaged chocolate, cigarettes, tinned milk and even clothing for those who had been hastily evacuated with little more than hospital pyjamas.

Each night there was an almost continuous stream of trucks moving through the village, but the expected orders for the New Zealand units never appeared. Finally, on the evening of 24–25 April Lieutenant H. M. Foreman ² (1 New Zealand General Hospital) was sent back to **Athens** for further orders. The ADMS, **Greece**, Colonel J. B. Fulton, RAMC, was

amazed to hear of the situation; Movement Control, **80 Base Sub-area** was equally surprised. Apparently the convoy should not have stopped at **Megara** but should have continued over the **Corinth Canal** to some embarkation point in the **Peloponnese**. Some seriously ill patients were returned to **26 General Hospital** at **Kifisia**; the others had to

¹ Unknown to **Divisional Headquarters**, J. H. Ledgerwood, afterwards notable for his work in **Crete** and in German prisoner-of-war camps, had gone north as an unofficial member of **19 Battalion**. Later two other secretaries were given permission to go as far as **Katerini**; the senior secretary, F. E. S. Long, after helping to organise the evacuation from **Megara** on the night of **25–26 April**, was unfortunate enough to become a prisoner of war.

² **Capt H. M. Foreman**, MBE; born **Auckland**, 1 Dec 1913; medical practitioner; medical officer **1 Gen Hosp** Feb 1940–Apr 1941; p.w. Apr 1941.

remain at **Megara**, Lieutenant-Colonel A. R. Barter, the senior officer at **Megara**, promising to arrange, if possible, for their embarkation on the night of **25–26 April**. ¹

Another small detachment under Lieutenant **Wilkinson** ² was more fortunate. The convoy with the sick and wounded had set out for **Voula**, but at **Daphni**, just a few miles west of **Athens**, Wilkinson's group had been ordered off the road by the military police who were restricting travel in daylight. The lorries had been taken back to **Athens** and the party left to its own devices for several anxious days before it was picked up by some New Zealand Divisional Postal Unit and **Army Service Corps** transport and taken to **Navplion**. From here they were taken off by **HMAS Perth** on the night of **26–27 April**. ³

¹ See pp. 408– 12.

² **Capt H. W. Wilkinson; Wellington; born Christchurch, 18 Nov 1913; P and T Dept engineer; Adj 2 NZ Div Sigs 1941; wounded 25 Nov 1941.**

³ **See pp. 428– 9.**

TO GREECE

FORMATION OF THE REINFORCEMENT BATTALION AT VOULA

Formation of the Reinforcement Battalion at Voula

At Voula there still remained the front-line reinforcements who had assembled there after the arrival of the different convoys or after the movement of the brigades to the **Mount Olympus** area. In March as many as fourteen different detachments from the camp had been scattered about the **Athens– Piræus** area as anti-aircraft gunners, mine spotters and guards for the many store and ammunition dumps. Some of this work had been taken over by 21 Battalion, but after that unit joined the Division on 6 April the guard duties were again the responsibility of the group. Once there was the chance of German landings two detachments of fifty were always on call to meet paratroop attacks, and after 17 April some eighty-five men under Captain **Hutchison** ⁴ were on guard duties about the Hassani airfield. At the same time officers were often detailed for special duties. On 20 April, for example, Captain **Baker** ⁵ and Second-Lieutenant **Porter** ⁶ of the **Maori Battalion** were sent to Force Headquarters in **Athens**. There they were told that they were under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Barter, who was about to establish an evacuation point at **Megara**. They left immediately and were present when the New Zealand groups came in from **Voula Camp**.

After the Convalescent Hospital and attached units had made their sudden exodus on the night of 21–22 April there were four days of intense activity and reorganisation. Including the detachments on guard about **Athens**, there were some 70 officers and 800 other ranks in the group. They came from thirty-one different units, had little fighting equipment and almost no transport. Trucks, Brens, machine guns and anti-tank rifles had to be ‘collected’ from the now loosely guarded ordnance depots. All this was done, with Captain Yates ¹ bringing order out of chaos and organising the men into companies: Headquarters Company, with engineer, anti-tank and machine-gun platoons, and four

companies of infantry.

From the camp itself there was still some movement. An officer from the remnants ² of 21 Battalion, then outside **Athens** prior to its embarkation, appeared and the platoon organised from that unit's reinforcements was allowed to join the main body and embark with 5 Brigade on the night of 24–25 April. Other men were detailed for duties outside **Athens**. Two small detachments under the command of Lieutenant **Findlay** ³ and another subaltern were sent to guard the **Khalkis** bridge to **Euboea Island**, the plan at this stage being for a New Zealand brigade to embark ⁴ from that area. Another detachment, with an Australian unit, went under the command of Second-Lieutenant **Brickell** ⁵ to the Greek barracks in **Athens** and took the German prisoners captured at **Servia** to a transport in **Piræus** harbour.

The same day, 23 April, movement orders were received. The battalion became part of Force troops and was ordered to proceed to **Navplion** on the night of 25–26 April for embarkation from 'T' Beach on the night of 26–27 April. During daylight on 24 April Lieutenants Curtis and **Spackman** ⁶ were sent to select assembly areas outside **Navplion** and after dark on the night of 25–26 April the battalion moved out, the guards from the wharves, dumps and airfield having come into camp or assembled along the highway to join the convoy.

⁴ **Capt O. J. Hutchison**; Hokitika; born Hokitika, 22 May 1904; grocer's assistant.

⁵ **Lt-Col F. Baker**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; born **Kohukohu, Hokianga**, 19 Jun 1908; civil servant; CO **28 (Maori) Bn** Jul–Nov 1942; twice wounded; Director of Rehabilitation, 1943–54; Public Service Commissioner, 1954–58; died **Wellington**, 1 Jun 1958.

⁶ **Maj W. Porter**, MC and bar; Kaeo; born Taumarere, 23 Aug 1915; taxi driver; twice wounded.

¹ **Capt H. S. D. Yates, ED; Christchurch; born Invercargill, 23 Apr 1911; clerk; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.**

² **See p. 376.**

³ **Capt J. S. Findlay, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 5 Sep 1909; painter; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

⁴ **See p. 372.**

⁵ **Capt D. R. Brickell; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 24 Mar 1915; confectionery manufacturer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

⁶ **Capt F. G. Spackman; Wairoa; born Napier, 17 Jun 1920; civil servant; p.w. Apr 1941; GSO III (Int) J Force Nov 1945–Jul 1946.**

TO GREECE

THE EVACUATION PLANS FOR W FORCE

The Evacuation Plans for W Force

The withdrawal of the divisions from the forward areas demanded more time and more carefully prepared timetables. Blamey had received his orders from Wavell on the night of 21–22 April, but **Freyberg** and **Mackay** were still preparing to hold the **Thermopylae** line. In the preamble to an operation order which was then being prepared, **Freyberg** stated that ‘The Div. is fit to fight and again demonstrate its superiority over the enemy ... the present position is to be held and from it we shall not retire.’ **Mackay** afterwards said, ‘I thought that we'd hang on for about a fortnight and be beaten by weight of numbers.’¹

The first warning to **Freyberg** was an order early on 22 April to halt the movement of a battalion to **Khalkis** and the Divisional Cavalry to **Euboea**. Then about 6 a.m. Lieutenant-Colonel **Wells**, senior Corps liaison officer, arrived from **Anzac Corps** Headquarters with a summary of the evacuation plan as it then stood. That night 4 Brigade and some supporting Australian units would go into position south of **Thebes**; each division would also withdraw a brigade group, which would wait under cover throughout 23 April, move back on the night of 23–24 April and embark from beaches east and west of **Athens** on the night of 24–25 April. The same night, 24–25 April, the balance of the force would leave the line, moving through **Khalkis** to **Euboea Island** to embark at some yet undecided date. Finally, on the night of 25–26 April the covering force south of **Thebes** would disengage; no details were yet available as to its place of embarkation.

The brigade commanders were immediately called to headquarters and given warning orders. **Hargest** was told that 5 Brigade, the forward formation, would be withdrawn from the line that night; **Barrowclough** learnt that 6 Brigade with all the artillery would remain at **Thermopylae** and **Puttick** was told that 4 Brigade, including 19 Battalion then on its

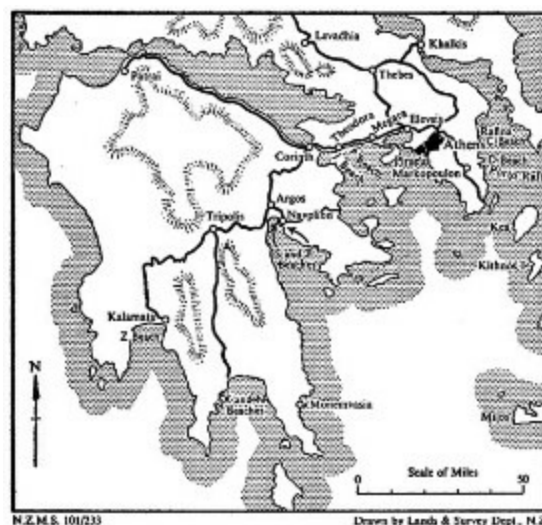
way to Delphi, would be the rearguard holding the line south of **Thebes**.

That afternoon Blamey and his divisional commanders, Mackay and **Freyberg**, prepared their more detailed orders. The final plans for the withdrawal of **W Force** were not issued until next day, 23 April, but the main features had already been explained to them.

W Force had been organised as **Anzac Corps**, **80 Base Sub-area** (**Athens**), **82 Base Sub-area** (formed from 1 Armoured Brigade) and Force Troops from the **Athens** area directly under Wilson's command: **4 Hussars**, **3 Royal Tank Regiment** and the Australian and New Zealand Reinforcement Battalions. To cover the withdrawal of these groups one New Zealand brigade ² would be sent south of **Thebes** to the ridge above **Kriekouki**. The original plan for embarking some units from Euboea had been abandoned and the collection and embarkation areas now were: **Rafina** ('C' Beach), **Porto Rafti** ('D' Beach), **Megara** ('P' Beach), **Theodhora** ('J' Beach), and **Navplion** ('S'; and 'T' Beaches). The staffs for these

¹ Long, p. 143.

² The orders actually stated 'one NZ Div' but one brigade was meant and there was no confusion.



THE EVACUATION BEACHES
THE EVACUATION BEACHES

areas, the beaches and the nights of embarkation for the different groups were then stated. On 24–25 April the units to embark would be 5 Brigade ('C' and 'D' Beaches), Headquarters **Anzac Corps** and one Australian brigade group ('J' Beach) and the **Royal Air Force** and some base details ('S' Beach); on 25–26 April 6 Brigade ('C' and 'D' Beaches), the other Australian brigade group and 82 Base Sub-area ('P' Beach); on 26–27 April 4 Brigade from 'J' Beach, Base Details, including Yugoslavs and **W Force** Headquarters (less Battle Headquarters), from 'S' and 'T' Beaches, the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion from 'T' Beach, and **4 Hussars**, 3 Royal Tank Regiment, the Australian Reinforcement Battalion and detachments of **82 Base Sub-area** all from 'S' Beach.

The orders also gave detailed instructions about the method of withdrawal. The convoys would move by night and to ensure maximum practical speed side-lights could be used; towing was forbidden and all breakdowns were to be hauled aside and their passengers transferred to other vehicles. As the Greek authorities were most insistent that no long-term damage be done to their railway system ¹ no major demolitions would be undertaken. In the beach areas, when motor transport would no longer be required, radiators and batteries had to be smashed and the engine casings broken with a sledgehammer. All implements and tyres had to be rendered unserviceable. No fires were to be lit and on no account whatsoever were oil and petrol to be destroyed by fire. Guns were to be rendered useless by the removal of the breech mechanism but all sights were to be brought away. Horses were to be shot; mules could be given to the Greeks. The troops were to leave with greatcoats, full equipment (less pack) and respirators. No other articles whatsoever were to be permitted in the lighters and the crews had to ensure that this order was obeyed.

In the **Anzac Corps** orders there were further details. Guns and technical vehicles not being used for troop-carrying were to be destroyed on the spot. The covering force would be 4 New Zealand Brigade with several Australian units under command: 2/3 Field Regiment, one anti-tank battery, 2/8 Field Company, one company 2/1 Machine Gun

Battalion and one field ambulance. In the orders of Anzac Corps this brigade group was to be evacuated on the night of 25–26 April ‘unless otherwise ordered.’

With the New Zealand orders there were other variations. Fourth Brigade Group would embark on the night 25–26 April as stated in the orders from Corps, not on 26–27 April as suggested in W Force orders. Fifth Brigade Group which would, according to Force and Corps, withdraw to ‘C’ and ‘D’ beaches on the night 23–24 April and embark on the night 24–25 April, would withdraw on the night 22–23 April and embark from beaches east of Athens near Marathon on the night 23–24 April. With 6 Brigade there was another variation. According to both Force and Corps the battalions would embark on the night 25–26 April from the Rafina and Porto Rafti areas; in the divisional orders they would on the night 24–25 April withdraw from Thermopylae and embark from the Khalkis area.

The orders for the divisional rearguard were quite definite. The Divisional Cavalry Regiment, the carrier platoons of 5 Brigade and 34 Anti-Tank Battery, all under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton, would cover the withdrawal of 6 Brigade from Thermopylae and then the withdrawal of 4 Brigade from Kriekouki.

But there were other irritating differences. The orders from W Force about equipment to be carried aboard ship were clearly stated yet those from New Zealand Division added gun sights,

¹ See pp. 471– 2. The Germans used the Greek railway system throughout the war and during their own withdrawal destroyed bridges and viaducts.

rifles, Bren and anti-tank guns, ammunition, wireless sets and small attaché cases for officers. There was even some uncertainty about the routes to be followed. Corps had said that on the night of 24–25 April a New Zealand brigade should, if the road was passable, move south from

the **Khalkis** area, and the New Zealand Division stated that the possible route to **Athens** was through either **Khalkis** or **Eleusis**. But on 23 April Corps just assumed that the Division would follow the coastal road from **Khalkis**.

The distances between the different headquarters, the broken communications and the constantly changing plans had been responsible for these conflicting orders. They were in most cases swiftly adjusted but there was nevertheless a certain amount of confusion. The beach officers, for example, followed Force orders and this led to fierce arguments when New Zealanders were asked to dump certain equipment on the embarkation beaches.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM THERMOPYLAE BEGINS, NIGHT 22-23 APRIL

The Withdrawal from Thermopylae begins, Night 22-23 April

Next morning, 22 April, saw the enemy building up his strength. His heavy guns opened up from the east and south of **Lamia**; tanks were parked unconcealed; aircraft landed south-east of Imir Bei; and the long vehicle column continued to move in from **Larisa**.

At the same time there was the ever-increasing fear of German forces encircling either flank of **Anzac Corps**. No force had landed on Euboea but 1 Armoured Brigade was warned that a landing was imminent, perhaps that night. First Rangers, whose headquarters were at Ritsona, had to send a company to **Khalkis** and be prepared to demolish the bridge. Three Bren carriers with the three C Squadron New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** armoured cars (Lieutenant Atchison) were sent to patrol the island but found no evidence of German landings.

On the extreme left the threat was more serious. The enemy were in Ioannina, and although they had not apparently reached Arta or Preveza the former town had been bombed heavily and was now in flames. To meet the expected attack demolitions were prepared in the Delphi Pass and the Greek headquarters sent infantry and anti-tank guns to come under British command and hold the approaches from Mesolongion to Amfissa. South of the Gulf of **Corinth** the Reserve Officers' College Battalion was sent to Patrai with some field guns to check any landing party. And the coast from **Corinth** westwards to Patrai was assigned to 4 **Hussars**, which had been reorganised into three squadrons, each with two tanks and two Bren carriers.

The only sharp action during the day was on the Australian front. Two 25-pounders below **Brallos Pass** opened fire on German trucks moving south towards the Sperkhios River. The enemy replied with medium artillery from the south-east of **Lamia**, field guns were brought

forward to the river, and by midday the position was serious. The stores of shells and charges had been hit and were exploding; one gun was out of action; and the surrounding undergrowth was ablaze. In spite of these difficulties the artillerymen remained in position and did their best to harass some German infantry who were now debussing from trucks at the foot of the escarpment to the west of the road. The officer and his men 'lifted the trail of the gun on to the edge of the pit so as to depress it enough to fire down the face of the hill and, using a weak charge lest the recoil should cause the gun to somersault, fired more than fifty rounds into the enemy infantry.'¹ The Germans replied and, although half the crews were sent out with parts of the damaged gun, the Australian casualties, before the guns were abandoned in the late afternoon, were six killed and four wounded.

The New Zealand sector was comparatively quiet, apart from the ever recurring air raids and some artillery fire at night. The only casualty came with the last raid before nightfall when trucks moving forward for the withdrawal were attacked and one man killed. The night, 22–23 April, in the forward areas was equally undisturbed. The covering platoons from 22 and 23 Battalions were not attacked and the brigade Bren carriers which went forward to patrol the river bank were never challenged, except by the frogs whose croaking was greater than even Aristophanes could have imagined. To the rear, however, there was great activity. Fourth Brigade Group moved out first. Nineteenth Battalion,² already in the Delphi area, had to be warned of the withdrawal but the other units, 1 Machine Gun Company, 4 Field Ambulance (less one company) and 18 and 20 Battalions, in the lorries of 4 RMT Company, moved back without any trouble to the **Thebes** area. Twenty-first Battalion, now 200 strong, handed over some twenty trucks to the other battalions of 5 Brigade, followed the 4 Brigade convoy and then carried on beyond **Thebes** to the Restos area near **Athens**.

The withdrawal of 5 Brigade from the left flank began about 9 p.m. The units—22 and 28 (Maori) Battalions, 4 Machine Gun Company and finally 23 Battalion—moved to the highway and then marched three

miles to embus, after which the convoy moved south to the **Ay Konstandinos** area, some 15 miles along the coast road.

After the convoys moved back A, B, C and F Troops of 6 Field Regiment withdrew to the west of **Molos**, leaving the forward

¹ Long, p. 146.

² See p. 361.

troops of 5 Field Regiment and 7 Anti-Tank Regiment in their anti-tank roles for another twenty-four hours.

To cover the gap which now existed between the left of 6 Brigade and the right flank of 6 Australian Division a covering force was left by 5 Brigade. Forward of the bridge were the Bren carriers from the battalions; south of the road in the 22 and 28 (Maori) Battalions' areas were Major Hart, Second-Lieutenants **Leeks**¹ and **Carter**² and fifty-eight other ranks of 22 Battalion whose task it was to suggest that the line was still occupied. In the 23 Battalion area there were Captain **Worsnop**,³ Second-Lieutenants T. F. Begg and **McPhail**⁴ and two platoons to hold the demolished bridge.

Finally, to check any attempt to scramble through the high country on the western flank of 6 Brigade, 25 Battalion moved its C Company on to the ridge from which 22 Battalion had withdrawn. This feature was an effective tank obstacle, and if it could be held against infantry attacks the Germans would be forced to traverse the very rough country south of the road before they could encircle the defence line and block the withdrawal through **Molos**. If they did get round below the cliffs and came down the gully between Mendhenitsa and **Molos** in which Brigade Headquarters and several of the artillery units were established, the position would have been turned. However, this risk was taken and the platoons went into line facing the road at the end of the ridge with the carrier platoon in reserve. As events were soon to show, it would have

been better had the flank of 25 Battalion been held in greater strength and much higher up the ridge.

¹ **Maj L. Leeks; Tamworth, NSW; born Wanganui, 22 Nov 1914; insurance clerk; twice wounded.**

² **Capt T. G. N. Carter; Lower Hutt; born Warkworth, 25 Jun 1916; law clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.**

³ **Lt-Col J. A. Worsnop, MBE; born Makotuku, 31 Jan 1909; Regular soldier; 23 Bn; 1 Army Tk Bn 1942–43; wounded 22 Jul 1944; CO Div Cav Bn, Japan, 1946; Area Officer, Christchurch; died Christchurch, 24 Jul 1957.**

⁴ **Lt-Col E. A. McPhail, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Wyndham; born Wanganui, 31 Dec 1906; bank official; CO 23 Bn May–Jun 1944, Aug–Oct 1944; CO 21 Bn Oct 1944–May 1945; wounded 9 Apr 1943.**

TO GREECE

THE FRONT WEAKENS

The Front Weakens

On the following day, 23 April, the insecurity of the **Brallos-Thermopylae** position became more apparent. Away to the west in Epirus there had at first been no noticeable movement of the German forces, but that afternoon reports ⁵ came in of hundreds of trucks moving south. As they could possibly reach Delphi within twenty-four hours, General Blamey saw to it that the road eastwards from Amfissa was blocked for motor traffic and that a small

⁵ Actually the German advance had not begun; they were probably Greek vehicles.

force—an Australian battalion with a troop of artillery and a company of machine-gunners—was established just east of **Levadhia** to cover the demolitions in the road.

On the eastern flank there were now signs of German activity. The patrol from the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, continuing its movement through the island of Euboea, found some eighty Australians and New Zealanders, ¹ once members of Allen Force, who were certain that the enemy was coming over from the mainland. Shortly afterwards several Germans were seen but no action took place and the patrol returned to the mainland. The great swing bridge at **Khalkis** was then to have been wrecked by a detachment from 7 Field Company, but before it arrived engineers from 1 Armoured Brigade destroyed the mechanism, leaving it wide open and impossible for the enemy to close. After that the channel coast was covered by C Company **1 Rangers**.

The wrecking of the bridge had been due to a change in the plan of withdrawal. **Divisional Headquarters** had been advised that 6 Brigade

would not move to Euboea but would withdraw to the beaches east of **Athens** for embarkation on the night of 26–27 April. There had also been a suggestion that the Division would retire to **Athens** by the northern route through **Khalkis** and **Marathon** and that the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** should move back to support C Company **1 Rangers**. However, **General Freyberg** considered that he needed the regiment as a rearguard; in any case, its vehicles were hastily being reconditioned after the long withdrawal from the **Katerini** area. So when Corps assumed that the Division would follow the coastal road, **Freyberg** rather frigidly informed General Blamey that he had already made plans for the Division to take the inland route through **Thebes- Elevisis- Athens**. The subsequent orders from Corps were for him to take such action as was then possible to cover the right flank and to support the Rangers. And later he did order the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** to send one squadron to the **Khalkis** area to assist the 1 Armoured Brigade units should there be any landing from Euboea.

The day was also notable for the increased severity of the air attacks along the south coast. The columns of vehicles moving along the historic road between **Elevisis** and **Corinth** suffered heavy damage. Stukas damaged ships in Salamis Bay, and Dorniers when machine-gunning the road round the cliffs surprised a Greek mule transport column and just slaughtered the unfortunate animals. The **Royal Air Force**, now operating from the landing fields near **Argos**, had been reinforced with five Hurricanes from **Crete**, but that evening when the majority of the aircraft were on the ground thirty

¹ See p. 344.

Copy to Blamey Times 1510 1510
I have issued a comm
The comm is a comm
Communication ability my
Route back to Crete
I have issued my order
Make my force to go back
behind the Army force
I am not able to alter
them
Will you please MP
to send this message through
the main pass & behind
the Army force
I will act on this plan
unless it is altered by
Comd
B.F.

Copy of message from General Freyberg to General Blamey on 23 April 1941 is retained in the New Zealand Division War Diary, April 1941.

Draft of message from **General Freyberg** to **General Blamey** on 23 April 1941 on withdrawal route of the New Zealand Division from **Thermopylae**. Copied from General Staff Branch war diary, April 1941

to forty Me110s appeared over the area. The Bofors opened up but they were soon silenced. The Germans, almost unopposed, then destroyed one Hurricane in the air and thirteen on the ground. The remaining aircraft could not have covered the evacuation; the odds were too great. So that same day orders were issued for their withdrawal to **Crete** to defend **Suda Bay** and to assist No. 30 Squadron in protecting the convoys.

The **Royal Air Force** authorities then made ¹ their own arrangements for the evacuation of the ground staff. On 24 April over 2000 men were taken south by train and motor transport, several hundred to **Yithion** and the majority to **Kalamata**. From there it was thought that they could be taken, at night and in fishing vessels, to the island of Kithira and eventually to **Crete**.

With no air support from the mainland, Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman then decided that if the embarkations were to be kept secret the convoys must not approach the beaches until one hour after dark and that all ships must leave by 3 a.m. This would give them some chance of clearing the coast without being observed and of coming within the area covered during daylight by the fighters operating from **Crete**.

In the **Thermopylae** area the enemy, as on 22 April, awaited the arrival of reinforcements from **Larisa** and was satisfied with long-range shellfire and more active patrols. To check one active battery to the east of Imir Bei and out of range of 25-pounders, three guns of 64 Medium Regiment were brought up to the **Molos** area, but even then the aircraft landing near Imir Bei and the column of vehicles streaming into **Lamia** were well out of range. The best that could be done was to harass any movement of men and transport towards the river and the Alamanas bridge.

More direct action came about 4 p.m. when Germans on bicycles and motor-cycles rode up to the Sperkhios River and crossed the demolished bridge. To deal with this group the 23 Battalion detachment was ordered to send out patrols to the right and to the left of the bridge. But the platoon commanders, after receiving their orders, were unable to reach their sections because of the enemy's steady machine-gun fire. Lieutenant McPhail thereupon set out to do alone what he had been ordered to accomplish with a patrol. Armed with a tommy gun, this determined officer went forward and shot two of ten Germans who were clambering over the bridge. On his way back he met two other Germans, one of whom he shot. After this resistance, and no doubt because of the harassing fire from 6 Field Regiment, there were no further attempts by the enemy to patrol beyond the river.

¹ Air Vice-Marshal Arthur S. Gould Lee, *Special Duties*, pp. 93–5.

TO GREECE

WITHDRAWALS FROM THE THERMOPYLAE AREA, NIGHT 23-24 APRIL

Withdrawals from the Thermopylae area, Night 23-24 April

When darkness fell over the Anzac area there began another series of withdrawals and adjustments. Fourth Brigade Group, which had been encamped in the **Thebes** area, moved the few miles south to the **Kriekouki** Pass and began to prepare the line which it would eventually have to hold as the rearguard of **W Force**.

In the Australian sector 19 Brigade withdrew to the **Brallos** area, leaving a two-company rearguard at the crest of the pass overlooking the highway to **Lamia**. Seventeenth Brigade came back from the rough country on the left flank and with 16 Brigade and Divisional Headquarters moved off in convoy towards the **Megara** area to await embarkation the following night. The column was eventually stopped near **Elevisis**, the units spending 24 April under cover in the olive groves.

In the New Zealand sector there was similar activity. Brigadier Barrowclough had decided that **Hart Force** and the guns in front of the spur immediately east of the baths at **Thermopylae** should all be withdrawn. After 9 p.m. the 23 Battalion detachment moved back to the old lines of 22 Battalion where the rest of Major Hart's group was waiting. The men clambered aboard the Bren carriers and returned to Headquarters 6 Brigade, where it was expected that transport would be waiting to take them back to 5 Brigade. No lorries appeared so **Hart Force** remained with 6 Brigade, moving with it to southern **Greece** and eventually to Egypt. A and B Troops 5 Field Regiment were withdrawn without any difficulty, the first to the right flank behind **Ay Trias**, the second to the west of **Molos**. The anti-tank element, 33 Anti-Tank Battery and E Troop 31 Anti-Tank Battery, came out and went into position near **Ay Trias** and along the road between that village and **Molos**. This left E Troop 5 Field Regiment in an anti-tank role in front of two-pounder anti-tank guns, so next day, 24 April, four anti-tank guns

from the **Northumberland Hussars** were brought forward.

To the rear of the FDLs there was corresponding activity. At **Ay Konstandinos** 5 Brigade had spent the day destroying equipment and preparing for the move that night to the embarkation beaches at **Porto Rafti**, some 150 miles away. Nothing was to interfere with the movement of the convoy: there would be no speed limit; headlights could be used beyond **Livanatais**; refugees could be moved aside; and, where the road was for one-way traffic only, oncoming vehicles could be stopped. To assist in the work at the control points on the beaches two officers from each battalion were sent forward to report at Headquarters British Troops in **Greece** in the Hotel Acropole in **Athens**.

The move began immediately after dark and the road was soon filled with a steady stream of vehicles. **Divisional Headquarters**, less Battle Headquarters, had moved back during the afternoon to **Atalandi**, so it was probably first on the road through **Thebes** and over the hills to **Athens** and the lying-up areas near the eastern beaches. Behind it were 4 Field Hygiene Section and 6 Field Ambulance, all in the latter's transport. These units, which had been sheltered in the olive groves of **Livanatais**, passed through **Athens** early next morning, 24 April, and the latter, when caught in the first air raid for the day, scattered throughout the olive groves and barley fields on the outskirts of the city. Fifth Field Ambulance, which had been established at Kammaena Vourla, a delightful resort on the beaches south-east of **Molos**, also moved back, the forty-odd patients with the assistance of some Australian ambulance cars moving with the convoy to **Athens** and thence to 26 General Hospital at **Kifisia**. When the unit was safely in the lying-up area near the beaches the bulk of its equipment was sent to that same hospital.

The main body—22 Battalion, 23 Battalion, 28 (Maori) Battalion, 19 Army Troops Company and 106 Anti-Aircraft Battery—came through in that order, moving swiftly and with very few mishaps. There was one break in the **Maori Battalion** column which encouraged an Australian convoy to take the road and led to some trucks following the

Australians, but they were able to rejoin the unit for embarkation. Otherwise the convoys were rattling through **Athens** during the early morning of 24 April. The streets were still empty and windows were shuttered, all very different from the crowded city which had received the Division so excitedly only six weeks before. The troops, if they were awake, were disappointed, but those who went through later in the day soon learnt that the Greeks could remain loyal to an apparently hopeless cause.

East of **Athens** the convoy hastened for another 25 miles to what was called the **Marathon** area, and when the sun was rising the trucks were turning off for shelter under the pines or in the olive groves. The men remained under cover. Brigadier Hargest returned to **Athens**, visited Headquarters British Troops in **Greece** and saw to it that his troops could embark carrying packs and one blanket as well as their light weapons.

The many other units which had been on the road that night were equally successful. Twenty-first Battalion, which had been encamped at Restos near **Athens**, and its reinforcement group which had been at **Voula Camp**, both rejoined the brigade. Fifth Field Park Company and 7 Field Company (less the detachment with **Clifton Force**) moved to **Mazi**, south of **Thebes**, and there assisted Australian engineers to prepare demolitions. Another convoy of 170 vehicles, mostly from the B Echelons of the Machine Gun Battalion and the **Divisional Cavalry** and artillery regiments, reached a valley south-east of **Levadhia**, where they spent the next day under cover of the olive trees.

TO GREECE

**CHAPTER 17 – THE DEFENCE OF BRALLOS AND THERMOPYLAE
PASSES, 24 APRIL**

CHAPTER 17

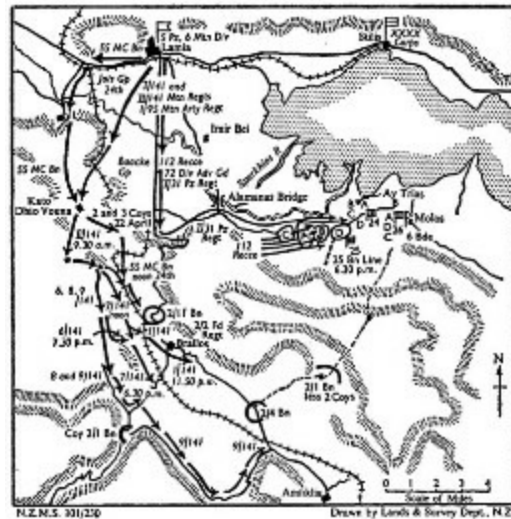
The Defence of Brallos and Thermopylae Passes, 24 April

The Germans approach Brallos Pass

ON 21 April the forward elements of *5 Mountain Division* had approached the Australian positions about **Brallos Pass**. Next day *55 Motor Cycle Battalion*, crossing the Sperkhios River well up-stream from the Allied positions, had begun an arduous march round the left flank of the Australian lines to Kato Dhio Vouna and Dhelfinon. *No. 3 Company 8 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit*, which moved from Vardnatais to the foot of **Brallos Pass** to hold the attention of the British, had been 'halted by very heavy artillery, mortar and HMG fire which caused its first casualties before it found cover on the hillsides.' ¹

The situation for the enemy was no better on 23 April. *Sixth Mountain Division* was now coming in from the east through **Volos** but *5 Panzer Division* had not been able to advance beyond **Brallos Pass**. *Fifty-fifth Motor Cycle Battalion* just east of Dhelfinon was attempting to build up its strength, but it was almost impossible for supplies or any heavy weapons to be brought through that wild country. The approaches to the pass were covered by the British artillery which, from the action the previous day, seemed to be of considerable strength. Moreover, there was still congestion along the highway between **Larisa** and **Lamia**: demolitions had only just been repaired and both the panzer and mountain divisions were striving to get south. As the former had the priority the mountain troops had, very often, to 'stand uselessly round' while a bakery company or the postal services of the panzer division went through to **Lamia**. Such indeed was the congestion and consequent confusion that about **Lamia** groups were incomplete and little effective reconnaissance was made of the Allied line.

The change came on the morning of 23 April when General Stumme reached **Lamia** and put into operation the now definite plans of **XXXX Corps**. The British were 'holding the **Thermopylae**



BRALLOS PASS AND THERMOPYLAE, 24 APRIL 1941

BRALLOS PASS AND THERMOPYLAE, 24 APRIL 1941

Pass ¹ and the **Molos** area' so next morning, after a softening-up by Stukas, an armoured force from **5 Panzer Division** would attack astride the **Lamia- Thermopylae** road with the crest of **Brallos Pass** as its first objective. That accomplished, a fast-moving force, **Baacke Group**, was to advance through **Molos** between the hills and the sea. Meanwhile **XVIII Corps** would send **Jais Group** from **6 Mountain Division** to outflank the pass from the west and cut the Allied line of withdrawal. **Eighth Air Corps** would support by attacking Allied gun positions and troop concentrations, particularly those in the **Skamnos** area south of the pass.

The attack began about 7.30 a.m. on 24 April. The **Luftwaffe** came over searching for gun positions and the main points of resistance; the volume of shellfire increased and the infantry began to move forward.

¹ To the Germans **Brallos Pass** was the new **Thermopylae**; the **Thermopylae** of ancient **Greece** was west of **Molos**.

during the night. The 2/11 Battalion, with a small detachment from 2/8 Battalion under command, covered the highway immediately north of **Skamnos**. On its eastern flank 2/1 Battalion (less two companies) covered the track through Kalothronion; to the south there was a company in the defile at Gravia through which a road came up from Amfissa. And astride the road beyond **Brallos** was 2/4 Battalion. The 2/2 Field Regiment, having been severely attacked from the air the previous day, had left its pits camouflaged with nets and moved back about 1500 yards to an area about three miles north-east of **Brallos**.

To the immediate west of the pass the Germans were unsuccessful. *Fifty-fifth Motor Cycle Battalion* moved from the Dhelfinon area across the Asopos River, but with almost no artillery support could do little; the companies were pinned down in a ravine west of **Kalivia** by 2/11 Battalion and the attached machine-gunners. It took the Germans several hours to reach the north slope of the heights to the west of **Skamnos**.

Still farther west, *Jais Group* had been assembling in the Kato Dhio Vouna area, but about 10.20 a.m. Colonel Jais was informed of the Allied withdrawals the previous night. No time was wasted. *II/141 Regiment* altered its thrustline, swinging in closer to **Brallos** but sending two companies to carry out the original plan of cutting the main highway five miles to the south of that town. By midday *7/141 Regiment*, with *1/141* following, had reached the right flank of *55 Motor Cycle Battalion* and was under Australian machine-gun and artillery fire.

In the **Brallos** ('new **Thermopylae**') Pass the attack was made by *1/31 Panzer Regiment*, reinforced with four Mark IV tanks from *3 Company*, the 88-millimetre guns from *1/61 Anti-Aircraft Regiment*, engineers, motor-cyclists and assault guns. The greater part of the force was to attack the prepared positions commanding the tortuous highway; one platoon would 'turn off from the pass road ... push through alone to **Molos**' but it was 'not expected that the enemy will defend this road strongly.' ¹

After a preliminary attack by Stukas the tanks set off along the straight road from **Lamia**. The Sperkhios River was crossed by a temporary bridge and they were soon approaching the demolitions at the foot of the pass. The first crater was passed but a wrecked bridge and a still bigger crater stopped any further advance. The *XXXX Corps* commander, General Stumme, then came forward to study the situation. In the meantime the selected platoon from *1/31 Panzer Regiment* turned off at the foot of the pass and

¹ Appendix to report by *1/31 Panzer Regiment*.

approached the New Zealand lines in the gap between the mountains and the sea.

The German Attack is diverted towards Thermopylae

In this area forward of **Molos** the morning had been relatively quiet. At first light the carrier patrol (Captain **Yeoman** ¹) from 24 Battalion had observed engineers repairing the Alamanas bridge and the armoured group across the river to the west approaching **Brallos Pass**. The artillery fire from both forces and the inevitable air attacks by the Germans had then developed, but the New Zealand gunners had no serious casualties, probably because of efficient camouflage and the policy of ceasing fire when any aircraft were actually overhead. In any case the full weight of the German attack, both by land and air, had been directed towards **Brallos Pass**.

The first sign of any change in the general plan was the appearance of the platoon of tanks from the foot of **Brallos Pass**. As they came round the bluffs they were observed by C Company 25 Battalion. The artillery opened up, wrecking one tank and forcing the others to withdraw. The report from the troop commander was 'Unexpected and extremely heavy opposition. Artillery firing like mad. Road block removed. Danger of mines.' This did not influence General Stumme; he had already decided to change his plan of attack. The company of tanks, instead of

attempting to force the **Brallos Pass**, would 'Push through to **Molos** and destroy the artillery.' ²

This led to some confusion for at 10 a.m. the advanced guard of 72 *Infantry Division (Baacke Group)*, ³ with the cavalry and cycle squadrons of *112 Reconnaissance Unit* under command, had already been ordered to advance through **Molos** and make a reconnaissance as far as **Atalandi**. The units had left **Lamia** at midday, had crossed the river well above the **Alamanas Bridge** and were approaching the defences when they came upon the tanks of *1/31 Panzer Regiment* which had a short time before been checked by the New Zealand artillery. A warning was then flashed back to *Headquarters 6 Mountain Division* informing it that *5 Panzer Division* was also using the highway because the 'new **Thermopylae** road' was impassable. The infantry commander, Captain Baacke, proposed to take the tanks under command, but just then the commander of the armoured regiment came up and decided that his unit would advance in support of the infantry. There was, however, no co-ordinated plan and the tanks and infantry acted independently.

¹ **Capt A. C. Yeoman**, MC; **Auckland**; born Taneatua, 8 Sep 1904; farmer; twice wounded.

² *Diary and report of 1/31 Panzer Regiment.*

³ 9 and 11 Coys (Cycle) and 12 (MG) from *III/124 Regt*, Cycle Sqn *72 Inf Div*, Cycle and Cavalry Sqns *112 Recce Unit*.

remained stable, though dive-bombing and strafing increased and the steady encirclement of the left flank continued.

The next attack began about 6 p.m. with the Germans still underestimating the strength of the defence; in fact, the operation order stated that 'a small enemy force is offering opposition to us.'¹ But the approach of the tanks along the highway and the particularly effective fire from some machine-gunners who had been sent to support the encircling movement beneath the cliffs made the C Company lines quite untenable. About 4.30 p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Wilder ordered the company to withdraw and Private **Common**,² under very heavy fire, took the instructions forward to 13 and 15 Platoons. By then they had very little chance of escaping. Some sections were pinned down by the machine-gun fire from the upper slopes; some were cut off by the Germans now occupying the pits from which 14 Platoon had withdrawn; and others suffered when the New Zealand artillery shortened its range to deal with the approaching tanks. The result was that by nightfall only a few men had rejoined the battalion.

By this time A Company had been threatened with encirclement. One section of 9 Platoon had opened fire on the tanks with its anti-tank rifle but the return fire had been too punishing. Soon afterwards the New Zealand artillery had once again shortened its range; the whole platoon came under fire and was finally withdrawn to positions below Company Headquarters. At the same time the Germans on the left flank, still supported by machine-gun fire, had been steadily coming over the ridges once occupied by C Company. To counter this Bren-gunners from 7 Platoon were sent up the ridges and a section from 8 Platoon was moved to cover the left flank and rear of the company.

The situation continued to deteriorate, more German infantry pressing forward and the machine-gun fire increasing. At 6.30 p.m. it was decided that the front must be adjusted. The platoons of B Company (Captain Armstrong) were swung round very neatly to form a line facing west rather than north, with 10 Platoon near the road, 11 Platoon above it and 12 Platoon still farther south. The platoons of A Company,

reorganised approximately along the spur from Headquarters A Company and also facing west, were in front of and out of touch with the left of B Company. To the rear was D Company, on the ridge above it the battalion Bren carriers and above them a group from A and C Companies collected by

¹ Appendix to report by **Capt Baacke** on action of *Advance Guard 72 Infantry Division at Thermopylae*, 23–25 April 1941.

² **Pte R. W. Common**, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 26 Mar 1917; seedsman; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

Sergeant R. Brown. ¹ By then the light was fading and the enemy was about to complete his movement round the hillsides, but the battalion front had been adjusted to meet it.

The weight of the attack then fell upon A Company. Some sections were forced to withdraw and some Germans did get through to Company Headquarters, but they were dispersed by hand grenades and a short impromptu bayonet charge. Another group which had come in high up and behind A and B Companies approached the Bren-carrier group (Second-Lieutenant **Sherlock** ²), but the forward section effectively checked that threat of encirclement. The front was then extended farther up the ridge but by then the attack had faded away. A and B Companies were still harassed by fire from mortars and tank cannon but the encircling infantry made no further approach. As the German report explained it, the defences had ‘strengthened surprisingly; the English defenders were excellently organised and camouflaged.’

The surprising feature—to the Germans—had been the complete failure of *1/31 Panzer Regiment* to break through to **Molos**. The German commander, after losing one tank in the swampy country towards the coast, had recklessly decided that they should advance in single file along the roadway. Brought forward shortly after the second attack had commenced, the tanks had passed the infantry sheltering in the ditches

beside the roadway and raced forward, turning their turrets to the right and shelling the forward companies of 25 Battalion. According to one German report:

19 tanks in file charged along the yellowish country road Ahead of us the first shells burst on the road. White clouds of dust shot up, mixed with black powder smoke, and were carried away swiftly by the wind. We could not deploy. On our right the hills rose 800 metres, and on our left stretched the dreaded **Thermopylae** swamp. We had to push on, go on, do anything but stop Then the dust rose right in front of the tracks ... suddenly we came under fire from 6 or 8 guns. Without halting we swung our turrets round to the right and answered the fire with great effect We were still moving. We must get through. But at the next curve all hell broke loose. Shells burst on all sides, and several machine guns chattered. A few Tommies [the section of 9 Platoon 25 Battalion on the north side of the road] ran across the road and disappeared in the thick scrub. A heavy tank was hit direct ... in the middle of the road sat three other tanks, all on fire ³

Before long there was 'not a single heavy tank, 37, 50 or 75 mm in going order; some had brewed up, others severe track or mechanical damage, only two able to shoot.' ⁴ They were reinforced by two tanks with 75-millimetre guns and one was able to support

¹ **WO I R. Brown**, MM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Junee, **NSW**, 12 Aug 1896; master grocer; won MM with AIF, 1917.

² **Lt R. F. Sherlock**; **Christchurch**; born Cobden, 15 Sep 1916; engineer; wounded Apr 1941.

³ Appendix to *I/31 Panzer Regiment* report.

⁴ *I/31 Panzer Regiment* report.

the company commander's tank, but the other which advanced towards the New Zealand guns was destroyed by a direct hit. The *1/61 Anti-Aircraft Regiment* which had advanced with the tanks could do little: one troop, two 88-millimetre guns, in the rear attempted to silence the New Zealand artillery 'which could be seen by muzzle flashes'; the other moved with the tanks, but the smoke from those which were hit and the uncertainty of the whereabouts of the men clambering round the hillsides above 25 Battalion checked their supporting fire. A Stuka raid in the late afternoon seemed to quieten the New Zealand artillery and as the light faded the rest of *I/31 Panzer Regiment* moved forward from **Lamia**, but by then, as the risks were too great, their commander had decided to wait until daylight.

The Importance of the New Zealand Artillery

This dramatic check to the German advance was almost wholly the work of the artillery. Twenty-fifth Battalion had certainly covered the left flank and adjusted its front under fire, but the other battalions of 6 Brigade had heard much but seen little of the action. B Company 24 Battalion had occasionally seen tanks and lorried infantry but the battalion had not been seriously attacked. Its task when the Germans began to encircle the left flank was to bring A Company over from the coast to protect the area between it and 26 Battalion. That unit to the rear heard the action but was not involved until late afternoon, when its C Company was sent forward on the left flank to cover the long re-entrant into **Molos**. And the platoons of 3 Machine Gun Company, one with each battalion, had not been seriously involved, though No. 1 Section on the left flank had been forced to withdraw when the left flank of 25 Battalion had crumbled.

Fifth Field Regiment, used in an anti-tank role, and the defensive fire of 4 and 6 Field Regiments and 2 **Royal Horse Artillery** had saved the day.

The guns of 5 Field Regiment had been on both sides of the road. To

the north, C Troop was in the 24 Battalion area from the coast to **Ay Trias** and thence to the highway. In support, just short of a stream that crossed the front, was a troop of two-pounders from 102 Anti-Tank Regiment. South of the road was E Troop (5 Field Regiment) in the area of B Company 25 Battalion, and farther back along the road was F Troop in the D Company area. There concealed, they had waited for the German attack.

In the morning and early afternoon they had remained silent under their camouflage nets, leaving the strafing aircraft to harass the regiments about **Molos**. The only group to be noticed was C Troop, which for almost four hours was dive-bombed and machine-gunned.

Then, when the Germans made their first approach, the fire of all guns, and particularly those of B and C Troops 6 Field Regiment, had forced the tanks and motor transport to halt before they reached the forward platoon of 25 Battalion. The tanks seemed to withdraw or, at least, to take cover; the infantry began their encircling movement below the cliffs and forced the withdrawal of C Company 25 Battalion.

Indirectly this meant trouble for the artillery. Its forward observation posts had to be vacated in a hurry to avoid encirclement. One was surrounded but Captain **Levy**¹ and his assistant managed to escape; three men with the OP truck were captured. The telephone lines to the forward posts were cut but Lieutenant **Cropper**,² hastening forward with signallers and wire, established another OP for the use of 6 Field Regiment.

The second attack developed about 6 p.m. with the tanks advancing in single file at intervals of about 50 yards. When they came forward the guns in the **Molos** area opened up and shells began to explode all along the road. 'As the road twisted and turned about the foothills there were portions of the road that we could see and when the tanks reached one portion about 600 yards range'³ the forward troops of 5 Field Regiment opened fire. The tanks continued to rush forward, but when they were 300-400 yards away F Troop used armour-piercing shells and high-

explosive shells with the caps left on. It was afterwards thought that the troop accounted for three tanks before the column disappeared into a hollow along the undulating road.

There it was ruthlessly dealt with by E Troop firing in enfilade at very short range from the south side of the road. With one gun was Bombardier **Santi**,⁴ 'the perfect gun layer, a natural',⁵ who remained cool and in spite of the fire from the tanks soon had eight mediums and one light tank disabled or on fire. Another gun of the troop claimed to have set one on fire and to have disabled another. Even so, the tanks still pressed forward, one getting through to within a few hundred yards of the bridge in the area of D Company 25 Battalion, where it was dealt with by B Troop of 31 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, the only New Zealand two-pounder to open fire in this action.

¹ **Capt P. B. Levy**, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 1 Aug 1906; advertising agent; died of wounds 24 Jul 1942.

² **Capt J. W. Cropper**; **Auckland**; born NZ 25 Dec 1916; clerk; p.w. Dec 1941.

³ 2 Lt **C. C. Pipson**, F Troop 5 Field Regiment.

⁴ **Bdr E. W. Santi**, DCM; born NZ 27 Dec 1917; tinsmith; killed in action 29 May 1941.

⁵ Lt **Cade**, the GPO.

While this was taking place the units on the north side of the road were being rewarded for their hours of dive-bombing and machine-gunning, small-arms and mortar fire. One gun, that of Sergeant **Ames**,¹ probably hit two tanks and may possibly have halted others; eventually it was hit by German fire, a solid shot hitting the recuperator and damaging the sights. The troop of two-pounders of 102 Anti-Tank

Regiment came into action soon afterwards and secured hits on five tanks.

In all some twenty tanks were claimed to have been hit. The artillery report states that the column was brought to a halt with the loss of fifteen tanks, most of them in flames: the brigade reported that the artillery had accounted for thirteen tanks and suggested that there could be ‘no question that any enemy movement along the road must have been seriously discouraged by the prospect of these gutted tanks and the dead bodies of their crews.’² The Germans admit that all the tanks in the action—18 or 19—were damaged, 12 of them being total losses.

In addition, the other artillery regiments, 4 and 6 New Zealand and 2 Royal Horse Artillery, had been firing a special anti-tank defence task on the road about Thermopylae. This concentration halted the supporting tanks and infantry so effectively that one German afterwards wrote of the shell and anti-tank fire performing a ‘danse macabre’.³ In the cruder language of the New Zealand Division the artillery had fired its first ‘stonk’: the terrifying concentration of the fire of all the divisional artillery upon a single crucial point. Later on in the desert when the system of mobile columns and brigade groups had been dropped and the Division was operating as a complete formation, there were many variations of this device, all based on the groundwork prepared by Brigadier Miles.⁴

To be so successful the artillerymen had overcome several difficulties. In the morning, when it was expected that heavy fire would be needed to cover the withdrawal, the policy had been to conserve fire, but after midday the supplies of ammunition had been increased. The dump and the four-mile stretch of road between it and the guns were often attacked from the air, but supplies had been hastened forward and gun numbers had assisted in carrying supplies from lorries to the guns.

Later in the day, when it was evident that no attack was to be expected across the low-lying country between the road and the coast,

there were some slight changes in position. B Troop 5 Field

¹ Sgt K. S. Ames; Otaki; born Wellington, 8 Jun 1908; accountant; wounded May 1941.

² 6 Brigade report.

³ Appendix to report of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*.

⁴ On 1 December 1941 he was captured at Belhamed.

Regiment was shifted to cover the roads and tracks leading into **Molos** from the west and south. C Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment was ordered forward from reserve to an area between **Molos** and **Ay Trias**, but because of the difficulty of moving along the exposed highway it remained some three miles east of **Molos**. The artillery fire from the Germans had not been heavy. B Troop 5 Field Regiment and F Troop 6 Field Regiment had both searched for enemy guns across the bay, but the range in both cases was extreme and the counter-battery fire was left to 64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, whose work was excellent.

The Australian Withdrawal

In the Australian sector the right flank was not threatened and 2/1 Battalion had, by the late afternoon, been withdrawn to the main highway. West of **Brallos Pass**, however, there were three attempts by the Germans to turn the left flank. In the 2/11 Battalion area 55 *Motor Cycle Battalion* had been held up in the gorge west of **Kalivia** by artillery and machine-gun fire. But *II/141 Mountain Regiment* had completed a left hook across the rough country west and south of the defences about **Skamnos**. *Fifty-fifth Motor Cycle Battalion* renewed its advance and with mortar fire and subsequent attack forced the withdrawal southwards of the forward companies to another line at which there was the reserve company, and from which the machine-

gunners could cover the vacated territory. A second and wider move to the west by two companies of *II/141 Mountain Regiment* was apparent about 6 p.m. and until dusk the company from 2/1 Battalion about Gravia was under fire.

With these threats of encirclement and the possibility of 2/11 Battalion being in serious difficulty, Brigadier Vasey decided about 6 p.m. that the withdrawal of 19 Brigade must be advanced by half an hour: 2/1 and 2/4 Battalions and attached troops to 8 p.m. and 2/11 Battalion to 8.30 p.m.

Meanwhile the Germans were struggling to cut off the withdrawal of 2/11 Battalion. Nos. 6 and 7 Companies from *141 Mountain Regiment* appeared to the south-west of **Skamnos** but they were soon held up by 'heavy shellfire'. No. 7 Company and 1 Company, which had been following it, were then ordered to cut the main road by moving through the scrub and over the ridges to Paliokhori, but by the time they reached it the Australians had withdrawn. And away to the south 8 and 9 Companies approached Gravia but had to halt just short of Evangelistria.

At 9 p.m. 2/11 Battalion and the company from 2/1 Battalion had moved back to the embussing area near **Brallos**, from which by 10.15 p.m., when the last trucks were moving off, the German flares could be seen rising away to the south-west. Later in the night the 2/5 Battalion group which had been covering the road from Delphi withdrew and moved south through **Thebes**.

The German attempt to turn the left flank of **W Force** had failed. The country had been too rough, food had been short and the supporting artillery could not be brought within range. The Australian defensive fire, particularly that of 2/2 Field Regiment, had been most effective.¹ And now on the morning of 25 April 19 Brigade was through the New Zealand rearguard south of **Thebes** and moving back to the olive groves at **Megara** and the beaches from which it was to embark that night, 25–26 April.

¹ *Jais Battle Group* had 3 killed and 23 wounded; no casualty return for *55 MC Battalion* is available.

The New Zealand Withdrawal

From the *Thermopylae* area there had been an equally successful withdrawal. Undisturbed by the enemy the units had withdrawn, embussed and driven south, reaching the main highway north of *Levadhia* and moving through the 4 Brigade rearguard at *Kriekouki*.

The plan of withdrawal was for the main body to leave the lines at 9 p.m. and march to the embussing area, a field east of *Molos*. From there the units would move south in either Army Service Corps lorries or their own first-line transport. One company from each of 24 and 25 Battalions, with one field regiment, would remain in position until the rest of the brigade had gone and would then be picked up in the forward area by unit transport. A brigade rearguard ² would be formed under Lieutenant-Colonel Page. In the original plan the artillery had been instructed to destroy its guns in the gunpits, but about midday *General Freyberg* had suggested 'attempting to get some guns away.' Each battery had been instructed to take out half its guns, but during the afternoon there had been some doubts about the availability of the lorries of the Ammunition Company for troop carrying. Orders had therefore been issued saying that no artillery transport was to be destroyed, no guns were to be towed away, but all efforts were to be concentrated on the evacuation of the infantry.

This doubt about the movements of the Ammunition Company had been due to a misunderstanding. The Brigade Major and the company commander, Major W. A. T. McGuire, had inspected the collecting point east of *Molos*, but the latter had left thinking that he had to bring up his vehicles that evening from the company area near *Longos*, thus escaping the bombing but still arriving to fit in with the withdrawal timetable. The brigade commander,

how-

² One tp 102 A-Tk Regt, one tp Fd Arty, Carrier Pl **26 Bn**, Coy **26 Bn**, two ambulances **4 Fd Amb**.

ever

, expected the vehicles to arrive during the afternoon. So with the Germans attacking and no transport appearing, the situation became somewhat disturbing, and about mid-afternoon Divisional Headquarters was asked to locate the company. **Captain Fairbrother** ¹ was sent to find it but his vehicle was shot up along the highway and no information could be obtained until the *Luftwaffe* vacated the skies at last light, when Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry successfully moved down the road and found McGuire. By then Barrowclough and Miles had decided that as many infantry as possible must be taken back on the artillery vehicles; the rest would have to march. At 9.15 p.m., however, just when they were on their way to the control point to issue these orders, they received a message from Gentry saying that the vehicles were arriving and that the withdrawal could take place as arranged. Apparently they had been held up by the craters on the road and by the stream of first-line transport withdrawing with the artillery regiments.

About 9.30 p.m. the majority of 24 Battalion embussed in the **Army Service Corps** vehicles; the rest, including part of A Company and all of C Company, remained until the other companies were away and then left on battalion vehicles which had been brought forward to the road fork behind **Ay Trias**.

South of the road it was more difficult to get clear. There was still machine-gun fire from the Germans high up on the left flank and A Company 25 Battalion had several wounded to bring out. However, with B Company and the remnants of C Company, it moved back through D Company, the covering company, reached the highway and set off down the road to **Molos**, some in unit vehicles and others on foot.

At this stage two unfortunate mistakes were made. Some drivers of C Company, in spite of warnings, carried on up the road beyond the bridge with the intention of shortening the march for the weary infantry. But they went forward into the lines of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*, whose diarist reported that ‘suddenly 4 English lorries, completely ignorant of the situation, came round the bend. At the sight of our tanks they jammed on their brakes and stopped a few yards away. Our machine guns shattered their windscreens. Some of their occupants fled into the darkness, falling over themselves in their haste. What did our men care that the Tommies were still all around? By the greatest of good luck they found in the lorries canned fruit, beautiful juicy pears.’²

¹ **Brig M. C. Fairbrother**, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; **BM 5 Bde** Jun 1942–Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr–Dec 1943; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun–Oct 1944; CO **26 Bn** Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd Adv Base **2 NZEF**, Sep 1945–Feb 1946; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1957–.

² Appendix to report of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*.

The carrier platoon was even more unfortunate. The orders had been to return in two carriers and the platoon truck; all other transport was to be destroyed. The three vehicles had been taken down the ridge to the highway beyond that German tank which had penetrated most deeply into the battalion lines. To reach the bridge the little group had to rush past the still blazing tank and in doing so were naturally enough mistaken for a German force. The anti-tank gunners and machine-gunners opened up so the carrier crews, thinking that the Germans held the bridge, returned the fire. All the vehicles were hit by two-pounder shells and the casualties were three killed, seven wounded—all eventually being taken prisoner of war—and one missing.

From then on there was no further trouble for 25 Battalion, and D Company, the rearguard, moved back about 10.30 p.m.

Twenty-sixth Battalion, less B Company, which had been detailed as part of the brigade rearguard, embussed in the **Molos** area and was clear by midnight.

The anti-tank gunners in the forward area had wrecked their guns and moved back in their own vehicles; only the guns of 33 Battery and possibly some of 31 and 32 Batteries were taken back.

The regiments of artillery had also been withdrawing. Fourth Field Regiment was to have moved out about 7.30 p.m., but because there were both ammunition and targets Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson had kept his guns firing until about 9.30 p.m. The crews had then emptied recuperators, removed breech blocks and hastened to their trucks, which were now in the stream of traffic moving south. About 9.15 p.m. 5 Field Regiment had wrecked its guns, the men then marching back to the vehicles and all being clear by 10.30 p.m. C Troop (Captain **Snadden** ¹) was to have been part of the brigade rearguard, but so much time was lost attempting to bring the trucks forward against the outgoing traffic that the guns had to be left and the men taken south. Sixth Field Regiment, having destroyed all its guns except one, had moved back about 9 p.m. The remaining gun had been retained in an anti-tank role, but when an enemy battery on Euboea opened fire the crew had been ordered to follow up the main convoy.

The brigade rearguard waited until 12.15 a.m., 25 April, and then, still undisturbed, hurried after the battalions.

Some eight miles east of **Molos** at **Cape Knimis** the divisional rearguard, **Clifton Force**, ² was waiting to cover the withdrawal. In the early part of the day it had been shot up by the *Luftwaffe* and Major **Jenkins**, ³ OC 34 Anti-Tank Battery, had been mortally

¹ Maj J. P. Snadden, MC; Wellington; born Te Kuiti, 24 May 1913; salesman; 2 i/c 5 Fd Regt Mar–Oct 1944; twice wounded.

² Div Cav, Carrier Pls **5 Bde**, one bty 2 RHA, 34 Bty 7 A-Tk Regt, one bty 102 A-Tk Regt.

³ **Maj A. V. Jenkins**; born NZ 30 May 1903; civil servant; died of wounds 26 Apr 1941.

wounded, but once the light faded the attacks stopped and the next worry for the troops was the late withdrawal of 6 Brigade. Once it did appear, every vehicle on the road was moving south, with Clifton urging each group to use its lights and see that no time was wasted.

To add to the excitement, about 11 p.m. a small boat was seen approaching the cape but there was no threat of a German landing. The new arrivals were a Greek and a member of 21 Battalion, who was hastily sent south in one of the passing trucks. After midnight the intervals between the convoys increased; Brigadier Barrowclough came through, and about an hour later Lieutenant-Colonel Page with his rearguard.

The engineers then began their work, **Clifton Force** moving back from demolition to demolition, collecting the two troops from the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment at the junction of the road from **Brallos** Pass and at dawn reaching **Levadhia**. After the Australian engineers had demolished a bridge on the Delphi road, the rearguards moved south to **Thebes**, where there was a covering force from elements of 1 Armoured Brigade. Here **Clifton Force** was instructed to follow 6 Brigade through the **Kriekouki** Pass and the lines of 4 Brigade.

Almost all **W Force** was now south of 4 Brigade at **Kriekouki**. Units from 1 Armoured Brigade were still about **Thebes** and a small group was covering the northern flank at **Khalkis**: C Company 1 Rangers, A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** and N Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery. The New Zealand units had attempted to move back from the **Cape Knimis** area during daylight but had been forced off the road by the *Luftwaffe*. Suffering casualties and losing vehicles, they had not reached **Khalkis**

until late that night.

The German Occupation of Molos

At that time—about midnight 24–25 April—the Germans at **Thermopylae** had been preparing yet another attack. The forward company of tanks had been roughly handled but the rest of *I/31 Panzer Regiment* had been rushed forward to relieve it. The commander, who had received no other orders, was not eager to risk the dangers of a night attack but Baacke, the infantry captain, was still aggressive. He sent his companies forward and they reported that **Molos** was clear of British troops. The tanks soon advanced but there was no immediate rush in pursuit of 6 Brigade; the German plans at this stage did not go beyond the capture of **Molos** and the movement forward of the main body from **Lamia**.

When the campaign was over the German commanders began a paper war in which infantry and armour competed for the battle honours. Baacke, the infantry captain, was awarded the Knight's Cross to the Iron Cross; his divisional commander grudgingly admitted that the tanks had 'arrived just at the right time to exert a favourable influence on the advance guard's attack.'¹ The commander of *5 Panzer Regiment* declared that *I/31 Panzer Regiment* had broken through 'the foremost enemy gun positions and fought the second line of guns to a standstill so that the enemy lost many killed, wounded and PW and fled from the position after nightfall. Not until nightfall when the fighting was over, did the advance guard of the mountain division (cyclists) appear and clear **Molos**.'² The heated argument even reached the level of Army Headquarters. More important to 6 New Zealand Brigade and the supporting artillery was the fact that they had been able to make a smooth withdrawal and that 'out of 18 tanks in the action 12 were total losses, and ... out of 70 men (all ranks) 7 were killed and 22 wounded.'³ The *1/61 Anti-Aircraft Regiment* and *704 Heavy Infantry Gun Company* had between them four killed and seven wounded. *Baacke Group* had lost 15 killed and 48 wounded, mainly from shellfire.

¹ **6 Mtn Div to XVIII Corps, 16 Sep 1941.**

² **5 Pz Div Comd to XXXX Corps Comd, 26 Apr 1941.**

³ **Ibid.**

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS APPROACH BRALLOS PASS

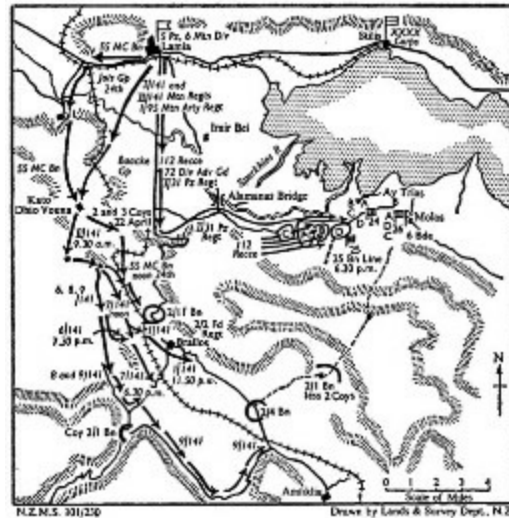
The Germans approach Brallos Pass

ON 21 April the forward elements of *5 Mountain Division* had approached the Australian positions about **Brallos Pass**. Next day *55 Motor Cycle Battalion*, crossing the Sperkhios River well up-stream from the Allied positions, had begun an arduous march round the left flank of the Australian lines to Kato Dhio Vouna and Dhelfinon. *No. 3 Company 8 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit*, which moved from Vardnatais to the foot of **Brallos Pass** to hold the attention of the British, had been 'halted by very heavy artillery, mortar and HMG fire which caused its first casualties before it found cover on the hillsides.' ¹

The situation for the enemy was no better on 23 April. *Sixth Mountain Division* was now coming in from the east through **Volos** but *5 Panzer Division* had not been able to advance beyond **Brallos Pass**. *Fifty-fifth Motor Cycle Battalion* just east of Dhelfinon was attempting to build up its strength, but it was almost impossible for supplies or any heavy weapons to be brought through that wild country. The approaches to the pass were covered by the British artillery which, from the action the previous day, seemed to be of considerable strength. Moreover, there was still congestion along the highway between **Larisa** and **Lamia**: demolitions had only just been repaired and both the panzer and mountain divisions were striving to get south. As the former had the priority the mountain troops had, very often, to 'stand uselessly round' while a bakery company or the postal services of the panzer division went through to **Lamia**. Such indeed was the congestion and consequent confusion that about **Lamia** groups were incomplete and little effective reconnaissance was made of the Allied line.

The change came on the morning of 23 April when General Stumme reached **Lamia** and put into operation the now definite plans of **XXXX Corps**. The British were 'holding the **Thermopylae**

¹ See pp. 375– 6.



BRALLOS PASS AND THERMOPYLAE, 24 APRIL 1941

BRALLOS PASS AND THERMOPYLAE, 24 APRIL 1941

Pass ¹ and the **Molos** area' so next morning, after a softening-up by Stukas, an armoured force from **5 Panzer Division** would attack astride the **Lamia- Thermopylae** road with the crest of **Brallos Pass** as its first objective. That accomplished, a fast-moving force, **Baacke Group**, was to advance through **Molos** between the hills and the sea. Meanwhile **XVIII Corps** would send **Jais Group** from **6 Mountain Division** to outflank the pass from the west and cut the Allied line of withdrawal. **Eighth Air Corps** would support by attacking Allied gun positions and troop concentrations, particularly those in the **Skamnos** area south of the pass.

The attack began about 7.30 a.m. on 24 April. The **Luftwaffe** came over searching for gun positions and the main points of resistance; the volume of shellfire increased and the infantry began to move forward.

¹ To the Germans **Brallos Pass** was the new **Thermopylae**; the **Thermopylae** of ancient **Greece** was west of **Molos**.

Nineteenth Australian Brigade had, fortunately, improved its position during the night. The 2/11 Battalion, with a small detachment from 2/8 Battalion under command, covered the highway immediately north of **Skamnos**. On its eastern flank 2/1 Battalion (less two companies) covered the track through Kalothronion; to the south there was a company in the defile at Gravia through which a road came up from Amfissa. And astride the road beyond **Brallos** was 2/4 Battalion. The 2/2 Field Regiment, having been severely attacked from the air the previous day, had left its pits camouflaged with nets and moved back about 1500 yards to an area about three miles north-east of **Brallos**.

To the immediate west of the pass the Germans were unsuccessful. *Fifty-fifth Motor Cycle Battalion* moved from the Dhelfinon area across the Asopos River, but with almost no artillery support could do little; the companies were pinned down in a ravine west of **Kalivia** by 2/11 Battalion and the attached machine-gunners. It took the Germans several hours to reach the north slope of the heights to the west of **Skamnos**.

Still farther west, *Jais Group* had been assembling in the Kato Dhio Vouna area, but about 10.20 a.m. Colonel Jais was informed of the Allied withdrawals the previous night. No time was wasted. *II/141 Regiment* altered its thrustline, swinging in closer to **Brallos** but sending two companies to carry out the original plan of cutting the main highway five miles to the south of that town. By midday *7/141 Regiment*, with *1/141* following, had reached the right flank of *55 Motor Cycle Battalion* and was under Australian machine-gun and artillery fire.

In the **Brallos** ('new **Thermopylae**') Pass the attack was made by *1/31 Panzer Regiment*, reinforced with four Mark IV tanks from *3 Company*, the 88-millimetre guns from *1/61 Anti-Aircraft Regiment*, engineers, motor-cyclists and assault guns. The greater part of the force was to attack the prepared positions commanding the tortuous highway; one platoon would 'turn off from the pass road ... push through alone to **Molos**' but it was 'not expected that the enemy will defend this road

strongly.’¹

After a preliminary attack by Stukas the tanks set off along the straight road from **Lamia**. The Sperkhios River was crossed by a temporary bridge and they were soon approaching the demolitions at the foot of the pass. The first crater was passed but a wrecked bridge and a still bigger crater stopped any further advance. The *XXXX Corps* commander, General Stumme, then came forward to study the situation. In the meantime the selected platoon from *1/31 Panzer Regiment* turned off at the foot of the pass and

¹ Appendix to report by *1/31 Panzer Regiment*.

approached the New Zealand lines in the gap between the mountains and the sea.

TO GREECE

THE GERMAN ATTACK IS DIVERTED TOWARDS THERMOPYLAE

The German Attack is diverted towards Thermopylae

In this area forward of **Molos** the morning had been relatively quiet. At first light the carrier patrol (Captain **Yeoman** ¹) from 24 Battalion had observed engineers repairing the **Alamanas** bridge and the armoured group across the river to the west approaching **Brallos Pass**. The artillery fire from both forces and the inevitable air attacks by the Germans had then developed, but the New Zealand gunners had no serious casualties, probably because of efficient camouflage and the policy of ceasing fire when any aircraft were actually overhead. In any case the full weight of the German attack, both by land and air, had been directed towards **Brallos Pass**.

The first sign of any change in the general plan was the appearance of the platoon of tanks from the foot of **Brallos Pass**. As they came round the bluffs they were observed by C Company 25 Battalion. The artillery opened up, wrecking one tank and forcing the others to withdraw. The report from the troop commander was 'Unexpected and extremely heavy opposition. Artillery firing like mad. Road block removed. Danger of mines.' This did not influence General Stumme; he had already decided to change his plan of attack. The company of tanks, instead of attempting to force the **Brallos Pass**, would 'Push through to **Molos** and destroy the artillery.' ²

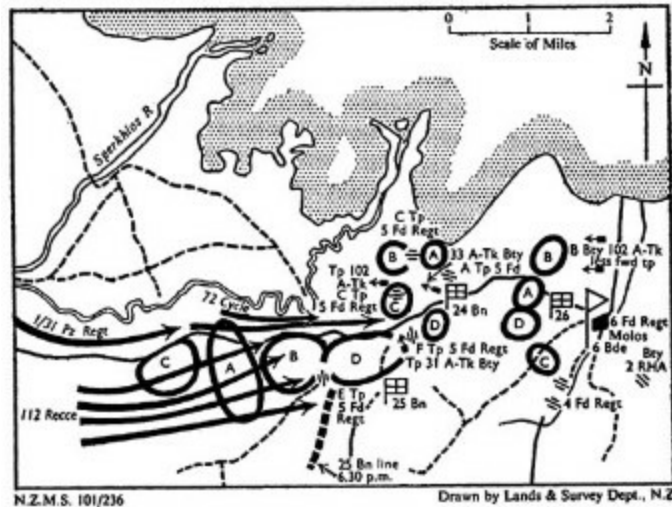
This led to some confusion for at 10 a.m. the advanced guard of 72 *Infantry Division (Baacke Group)*, ³ with the cavalry and cycle squadrons of 112 *Reconnaissance Unit* under command, had already been ordered to advance through **Molos** and make a reconnaissance as far as **Atalandi**. The units had left **Lamia** at midday, had crossed the river well above the **Alamanas Bridge** and were approaching the defences when they came upon the tanks of 1/31 *Panzer Regiment* which had a short time before been checked by the New Zealand artillery. A warning

was then flashed back to *Headquarters 6 Mountain Division* informing it that *5 Panzer Division* was also using the highway because the 'new *Thermopylae road*' was impassable. The infantry commander, Captain Baacke, proposed to take the tanks under command, but just then the commander of the armoured regiment came up and decided that his unit would advance in support of the infantry. There was, however, no co-ordinated plan and the tanks and infantry acted independently.

¹ **Capt A. C. Yeoman, MC; Auckland;** born Taneatua, 8 Sep 1904; farmer; twice wounded.

² **Diary and report of I/31 Panzer Regiment.**

³ **9 and 11 Coys (Cycle) and 12 (MG) from III/124 Regt, Cycle Sqn 72 Inf Div, Cycle and Cavalry Sqns 112 Recce Unit.**



Thermopylae, 24 April 1941

Thermopylae, 24 April 1941

The move was soon under way, but about 4.15 p.m. the infantry came under fire from 25 Battalion. One company went into position near the highway and the other was ordered to make an encircling movement across the scrub-covered ridges on the left flank of the New Zealand position. But after advancing some 300 yards the attack faded away. The

infantry asked for the support of the heavy weapons; mortars and machine guns were hurried forward; and orders were prepared for a more formidable attack.

As seen by 25 Battalion, there had been a lull after the morning engagement with the tanks, though German aircraft had been harassing all areas and the artillery of both forces had been searching all possible assembly areas. Then at 2 p.m. there had been even heavier air attacks, after which tanks, lorried infantry and motorcyclists had been observed along the road to the west. They had been engaged by B and C Troops 6 Field Regiment and the heavy vehicles had been stopped, but the cyclists had raced forward until they came under fire from 14 Platoon C Company 25 Battalion on the extreme left flank. Nos. 15 and 13 Platoons, using small-arms and mortar fire, kept many of them pinned to the road and the nearby scrub, but others took to the ridges and began to climb upwards and forward until they overlooked the lines of C Company. Two sections of 14 Platoon were forced back but they were used to fill the gap between C and A Companies. The front then remained stable, though dive-bombing and strafing increased and the steady encirclement of the left flank continued.

The next attack began about 6 p.m. with the Germans still underestimating the strength of the defence; in fact, the operation order stated that 'a small enemy force is offering opposition to us.' ¹ But the approach of the tanks along the highway and the particularly effective fire from some machine-gunners who had been sent to support the encircling movement beneath the cliffs made the C Company lines quite untenable. About 4.30 p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Wilder ordered the company to withdraw and Private **Common, ² under very heavy fire, took the instructions forward to 13 and 15 Platoons. By then they had very little chance of escaping. Some sections were pinned down by the machine-gun fire from the upper slopes; some were cut off by the Germans now occupying the pits from which 14 Platoon had withdrawn; and others suffered when the New Zealand artillery shortened its range to deal with the approaching tanks. The result was that by nightfall only**

a few men had rejoined the battalion.

By this time A Company had been threatened with encirclement. One section of 9 Platoon had opened fire on the tanks with its anti-tank rifle but the return fire had been too punishing. Soon afterwards the New Zealand artillery had once again shortened its range; the whole platoon came under fire and was finally withdrawn to positions below Company Headquarters. At the same time the Germans on the left flank, still supported by machine-gun fire, had been steadily coming over the ridges once occupied by C Company. To counter this Bren-gunners from 7 Platoon were sent up the ridges and a section from 8 Platoon was moved to cover the left flank and rear of the company.

The situation continued to deteriorate, more German infantry pressing forward and the machine-gun fire increasing. At 6.30 p.m. it was decided that the front must be adjusted. The platoons of B Company (Captain Armstrong) were swung round very neatly to form a line facing west rather than north, with 10 Platoon near the road, 11 Platoon above it and 12 Platoon still farther south. The platoons of A Company, reorganised approximately along the spur from Headquarters A Company and also facing west, were in front of and out of touch with the left of B Company. To the rear was D Company, on the ridge above it the battalion Bren carriers and above them a group from A and C Companies collected by

¹ Appendix to report by **Capt Baacke** on action of *Advance Guard 72 Infantry Division at Thermopylae*, 23–25 April 1941.

² **Pte R. W. Common**, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 26 Mar 1917; seedsman; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

Sergeant R. Brown. ¹ By then the light was fading and the enemy was about to complete his movement round the hillsides, but the battalion front had been adjusted to meet it.

The weight of the attack then fell upon A Company. Some sections were forced to withdraw and some Germans did get through to Company Headquarters, but they were dispersed by hand grenades and a short impromptu bayonet charge. Another group which had come in high up and behind A and B Companies approached the Bren-carrier group (Second-Lieutenant **Sherlock** ²), but the forward section effectively checked that threat of encirclement. The front was then extended farther up the ridge but by then the attack had faded away. A and B Companies were still harassed by fire from mortars and tank cannon but the encircling infantry made no further approach. As the German report explained it, the defences had 'strengthened surprisingly; the English defenders were excellently organised and camouflaged.'

The surprising feature—to the Germans—had been the complete failure of *1/31 Panzer Regiment* to break through to **Molos**. The German commander, after losing one tank in the swampy country towards the coast, had recklessly decided that they should advance in single file along the roadway. Brought forward shortly after the second attack had commenced, the tanks had passed the infantry sheltering in the ditches beside the roadway and raced forward, turning their turrets to the right and shelling the forward companies of 25 Battalion. According to one German report:

19 tanks in file charged along the yellowish country road Ahead of us the first shells burst on the road. White clouds of dust shot up, mixed with black powder smoke, and were carried away swiftly by the wind. We could not deploy. On our right the hills rose 800 metres, and on our left stretched the dreaded **Thermopylae** swamp. We had to push on, go on, do anything but stop Then the dust rose right in front of the tracks ... suddenly we came under fire from 6 or 8 guns. Without halting we swung our turrets round to the right and answered the fire with great effect We were still moving. We must get through. But at the next curve all hell broke loose. Shells burst on all sides, and several machine guns chattered. A few Tommies [the section of 9 Platoon 25 Battalion on the north side of the road] ran across the road and

disappeared in the thick scrub. A heavy tank was hit direct ... in the middle of the road sat three other tanks, all on fire³

Before long there was 'not a single heavy tank, 37, 50 or 75 mm in going order; some had brewed up, others severe track or mechanical damage, only two able to shoot.'⁴ They were reinforced by two tanks with 75-millimetre guns and one was able to support

¹ **WO I R. Brown**, MM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born June, **NSW**, 12 Aug 1896; master grocer; won MM with AIF, 1917.

² **Lt R. F. Sherlock**; **Christchurch**; born Cobden, 15 Sep 1916; engineer; wounded Apr 1941.

³ Appendix to *I/31 Panzer Regiment* report.

⁴ *I/31 Panzer Regiment* report.

the company commander's tank, but the other which advanced towards the New Zealand guns was destroyed by a direct hit. The *1/61 Anti-Aircraft Regiment* which had advanced with the tanks could do little: one troop, two 88-millimetre guns, in the rear attempted to silence the New Zealand artillery 'which could be seen by muzzle flashes'; the other moved with the tanks, but the smoke from those which were hit and the uncertainty of the whereabouts of the men clambering round the hillsides above 25 Battalion checked their supporting fire. A Stuka raid in the late afternoon seemed to quieten the New Zealand artillery and as the light faded the rest of *I/31 Panzer Regiment* moved forward from **Lamia**, but by then, as the risks were too great, their commander had decided to wait until daylight.

TO GREECE

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW ZEALAND ARTILLERY

The Importance of the New Zealand Artillery

This dramatic check to the German advance was almost wholly the work of the artillery. Twenty-fifth Battalion had certainly covered the left flank and adjusted its front under fire, but the other battalions of 6 Brigade had heard much but seen little of the action. B Company 24 Battalion had occasionally seen tanks and lorried infantry but the battalion had not been seriously attacked. Its task when the Germans began to encircle the left flank was to bring A Company over from the coast to protect the area between it and 26 Battalion. That unit to the rear heard the action but was not involved until late afternoon, when its C Company was sent forward on the left flank to cover the long re-entrant into **Molos. And the platoons of 3 Machine Gun Company, one with each battalion, had not been seriously involved, though No. 1 Section on the left flank had been forced to withdraw when the left flank of 25 Battalion had crumbled.**

Fifth Field Regiment, used in an anti-tank role, and the defensive fire of 4 and 6 Field Regiments and 2 **Royal Horse Artillery had saved the day.**

The guns of 5 Field Regiment had been on both sides of the road. To the north, C Troop was in the 24 Battalion area from the coast to **Ay Trias and thence to the highway. In support, just short of a stream that crossed the front, was a troop of two-pounders from 102 Anti-Tank Regiment. South of the road was E Troop (5 Field Regiment) in the area of B Company 25 Battalion, and farther back along the road was F Troop in the D Company area. There concealed, they had waited for the German attack.**

In the morning and early afternoon they had remained silent under their camouflage nets, leaving the strafing aircraft to harass the

regiments about **Molos**. The only group to be noticed was C Troop, which for almost four hours was dive-bombed and machine-gunned.

Then, when the Germans made their first approach, the fire of all guns, and particularly those of B and C Troops 6 Field Regiment, had forced the tanks and motor transport to halt before they reached the forward platoon of 25 Battalion. The tanks seemed to withdraw or, at least, to take cover; the infantry began their encircling movement below the cliffs and forced the withdrawal of C Company 25 Battalion.

Indirectly this meant trouble for the artillery. Its forward observation posts had to be vacated in a hurry to avoid encirclement. One was surrounded but Captain **Levy**¹ and his assistant managed to escape; three men with the OP truck were captured. The telephone lines to the forward posts were cut but Lieutenant **Cropper**,² hastening forward with signallers and wire, established another OP for the use of 6 Field Regiment.

The second attack developed about 6 p.m. with the tanks advancing in single file at intervals of about 50 yards. When they came forward the guns in the **Molos** area opened up and shells began to explode all along the road. 'As the road twisted and turned about the foothills there were portions of the road that we could see and when the tanks reached one portion about 600 yards range'³ the forward troops of 5 Field Regiment opened fire. The tanks continued to rush forward, but when they were 300–400 yards away F Troop used armour-piercing shells and high-explosive shells with the caps left on. It was afterwards thought that the troop accounted for three tanks before the column disappeared into a hollow along the undulating road.

There it was ruthlessly dealt with by E Troop firing in enfilade at very short range from the south side of the road. With one gun was Bombardier **Santi**,⁴ 'the perfect gun layer, a natural',⁵ who remained cool and in spite of the fire from the tanks soon had eight mediums and one light tank disabled or on fire. Another gun of the troop claimed to have set one on fire and to have disabled another. Even so, the tanks

still pressed forward, one getting through to within a few hundred yards of the bridge in the area of D Company 25 Battalion, where it was dealt with by B Troop of 31 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, the only New Zealand two-pounder to open fire in this action.

¹ **Capt P. B. Levy**, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 1 Aug 1906; advertising agent; died of wounds 24 Jul 1942.

² **Capt J. W. Cropper**; **Auckland**; born NZ 25 Dec 1916; clerk; p.w. Dec 1941.

³ **2 Lt C. C. Pipson**, F Troop 5 Field Regiment.

⁴ **Bdr E. W. Santi**, DCM; born NZ 27 Dec 1917; tinsmith; killed in action 29 May 1941.

⁵ **Lt Cade**, the GPO.

While this was taking place the units on the north side of the road were being rewarded for their hours of dive-bombing and machine-gunning, small-arms and mortar fire. One gun, that of Sergeant **Ames**,¹ probably hit two tanks and may possibly have halted others; eventually it was hit by German fire, a solid shot hitting the recuperator and damaging the sights. The troop of two-pounders of 102 Anti-Tank Regiment came into action soon afterwards and secured hits on five tanks.

In all some twenty tanks were claimed to have been hit. The artillery report states that the column was brought to a halt with the loss of fifteen tanks, most of them in flames: the brigade reported that the artillery had accounted for thirteen tanks and suggested that there could be 'no question that any enemy movement along the road must have been seriously discouraged by the prospect of these gutted tanks and the dead bodies of their crews.'² The Germans admit that all the

tanks in the action—18 or 19—were damaged, 12 of them being total losses.

In addition, the other artillery regiments, 4 and 6 New Zealand and 2 **Royal Horse Artillery**, had been firing a special anti-tank defence task on the road about **Thermopylae**. This concentration halted the supporting tanks and infantry so effectively that one German afterwards wrote of the shell and anti-tank fire performing a ‘danse macabre’. ³ In the cruder language of the New Zealand Division the artillery had fired its first ‘stonk’: the terrifying concentration of the fire of all the divisional artillery upon a single crucial point. Later on in the desert when the system of mobile columns and brigade groups had been dropped and the Division was operating as a complete formation, there were many variations of this device, all based on the groundwork prepared by Brigadier Miles. ⁴

To be so successful the artillerymen had overcome several difficulties. In the morning, when it was expected that heavy fire would be needed to cover the withdrawal, the policy had been to conserve fire, but after midday the supplies of ammunition had been increased. The dump and the four-mile stretch of road between it and the guns were often attacked from the air, but supplies had been hastened forward and gun numbers had assisted in carrying supplies from lorries to the guns.

Later in the day, when it was evident that no attack was to be expected across the low-lying country between the road and the coast, there were some slight changes in position. B Troop 5 Field

¹ **Sgt K. S. Ames; Otaki; born Wellington, 8 Jun 1908; accountant; wounded May 1941.**

² 6 Brigade report.

³ Appendix to report of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*.

⁴ On 1 December 1941 he was captured at **Belhamed**.

Regiment was shifted to cover the roads and tracks leading into **Molos** from the west and south. C Battery 102 Anti-Tank Regiment was ordered forward from reserve to an area between **Molos** and **Ay Trias**, but because of the difficulty of moving along the exposed highway it remained some three miles east of **Molos**. The artillery fire from the Germans had not been heavy. B Troop 5 Field Regiment and F Troop 6 Field Regiment had both searched for enemy guns across the bay, but the range in both cases was extreme and the counter-battery fire was left to 64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, whose work was excellent.

TO GREECE

THE AUSTRALIAN WITHDRAWAL

The Australian Withdrawal

In the Australian sector the right flank was not threatened and 2/1 Battalion had, by the late afternoon, been withdrawn to the main highway. West of **Brallos Pass**, however, there were three attempts by the Germans to turn the left flank. In the 2/11 Battalion area *55 Motor Cycle Battalion* had been held up in the gorge west of **Kalivia** by artillery and machine-gun fire. But *II/141 Mountain Regiment* had completed a left hook across the rough country west and south of the defences about **Skamnos**. *Fifty-fifth Motor Cycle Battalion* renewed its advance and with mortar fire and subsequent attack forced the withdrawal southwards of the forward companies to another line at which there was the reserve company, and from which the machine-gunners could cover the vacated territory. A second and wider move to the west by two companies of *II/141 Mountain Regiment* was apparent about 6 p.m. and until dusk the company from 2/1 Battalion about Gravia was under fire.

With these threats of encirclement and the possibility of 2/11 Battalion being in serious difficulty, Brigadier Vasey decided about 6 p.m. that the withdrawal of 19 Brigade must be advanced by half an hour: 2/1 and 2/4 Battalions and attached troops to 8 p.m. and 2/11 Battalion to 8.30 p.m.

Meanwhile the Germans were struggling to cut off the withdrawal of 2/11 Battalion. *Nos. 6 and 7 Companies* from *141 Mountain Regiment* appeared to the south-west of **Skamnos** but they were soon held up by 'heavy shellfire'. *No. 7 Company* and *1 Company*, which had been following it, were then ordered to cut the main road by moving through the scrub and over the ridges to Paliokhori, but by the time they reached it the Australians had withdrawn. And away to the south 8 and 9 *Companies* approached Gravia but had to halt just short of

Evangelistria.

At 9 p.m. 2/11 Battalion and the company from 2/1 Battalion had moved back to the embussing area near **Brallos, from which by 10.15 p.m., when the last trucks were moving off, the German flares could be seen rising away to the south-west. Later in the night the 2/5 Battalion group which had been covering the road from Delphi withdrew and moved south through **Thebes**.**

The German attempt to turn the left flank of **W Force had failed. The country had been too rough, food had been short and the supporting artillery could not be brought within range. The Australian defensive fire, particularly that of 2/2 Field Regiment, had been most effective. ¹ And now on the morning of 25 April 19 Brigade was through the New Zealand rearguard south of **Thebes** and moving back to the olive groves at **Megara** and the beaches from which it was to embark that night, 25–26 April.**

¹ *Jais Battle Group* had 3 killed and 23 wounded; no casualty return for *55 MC Battalion* is available.

TO GREECE

THE NEW ZEALAND WITHDRAWAL

The New Zealand Withdrawal

From the **Thermopylae** area there had been an equally successful withdrawal. Undisturbed by the enemy the units had withdrawn, embussed and driven south, reaching the main highway north of **Levadhia** and moving through the 4 Brigade rearguard at **Kriekouki**.

The plan of withdrawal was for the main body to leave the lines at 9 p.m. and march to the embussing area, a field east of **Molos**. From there the units would move south in either Army Service Corps lorries or their own first-line transport. One company from each of 24 and 25 Battalions, with one field regiment, would remain in position until the rest of the brigade had gone and would then be picked up in the forward area by unit transport. A brigade rearguard ² would be formed under Lieutenant-Colonel Page. In the original plan the artillery had been instructed to destroy its guns in the gunpits, but about midday **General Freyberg** had suggested 'attempting to get some guns away.' Each battery had been instructed to take out half its guns, but during the afternoon there had been some doubts about the availability of the lorries of the Ammunition Company for troop carrying. Orders had therefore been issued saying that no artillery transport was to be destroyed, no guns were to be towed away, but all efforts were to be concentrated on the evacuation of the infantry.

This doubt about the movements of the Ammunition Company had been due to a misunderstanding. The Brigade Major and the company commander, Major W. A. T. McGuire, had inspected the collecting point east of **Molos**, but the latter had left thinking that he had to bring up his vehicles that evening from the company area near **Longos**, thus escaping the bombing but still arriving to fit in with the withdrawal timetable. The brigade commander,

how-

² One tp 102 A-Tk Regt, one tp Fd Arty, Carrier Pl **26 Bn**, Coy **26 Bn**, two ambulances **4 Fd Amb**.

ever

, expected the vehicles to arrive during the afternoon. So with the Germans attacking and no transport appearing, the situation became somewhat disturbing, and about mid-afternoon Divisional Headquarters was asked to locate the company. **Captain Fairbrother**¹ was sent to find it but his vehicle was shot up along the highway and no information could be obtained until the *Luftwaffe* vacated the skies at last light, when Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry successfully moved down the road and found McGuire. By then Barrowclough and Miles had decided that as many infantry as possible must be taken back on the artillery vehicles; the rest would have to march. At 9.15 p.m., however, just when they were on their way to the control point to issue these orders, they received a message from Gentry saying that the vehicles were arriving and that the withdrawal could take place as arranged. Apparently they had been held up by the craters on the road and by the stream of first-line transport withdrawing with the artillery regiments.

About 9.30 p.m. the majority of 24 Battalion embussed in the **Army Service Corps** vehicles; the rest, including part of A Company and all of C Company, remained until the other companies were away and then left on battalion vehicles which had been brought forward to the road fork behind **Ay Trias**.

South of the road it was more difficult to get clear. There was still machine-gun fire from the Germans high up on the left flank and A Company 25 Battalion had several wounded to bring out. However, with B Company and the remnants of C Company, it moved back through D Company, the covering company, reached the highway and set off down the road to **Molos**, some in unit vehicles and others on foot.

At this stage two unfortunate mistakes were made. Some drivers of C Company, in spite of warnings, carried on up the road beyond the bridge with the intention of shortening the march for the weary infantry. But they went forward into the lines of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*, whose diarist reported that ‘suddenly 4 English lorries, completely ignorant of the situation, came round the bend. At the sight of our tanks they jammed on their brakes and stopped a few yards away. Our machine guns shattered their windscreens. Some of their occupants fled into the darkness, falling over themselves in their haste. What did our men care that the Tommies were still all around? By the greatest of good luck they found in the lorries canned fruit, beautiful juicy pears.’²

¹ **Brig M. C. Fairbrother**, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; **BM 5 Bde** Jun 1942–Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr–Dec 1943; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun–Oct 1944; CO **26 Bn** Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd Adv Base **2 NZEF**, Sep 1945–Feb 1946; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1957–.

² Appendix to report of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*.

The carrier platoon was even more unfortunate. The orders had been to return in two carriers and the platoon truck; all other transport was to be destroyed. The three vehicles had been taken down the ridge to the highway beyond that German tank which had penetrated most deeply into the battalion lines. To reach the bridge the little group had to rush past the still blazing tank and in doing so were naturally enough mistaken for a German force. The anti-tank gunners and machine-gunners opened up so the carrier crews, thinking that the Germans held the bridge, returned the fire. All the vehicles were hit by two-pounder shells and the casualties were three killed, seven wounded—all eventually being taken prisoner of war—and one missing.

From then on there was no further trouble for 25 Battalion, and D Company, the rearguard, moved back about 10.30 p.m.

Twenty-sixth Battalion, less B Company, which had been detailed as part of the brigade rearguard, embussed in the **Molos** area and was clear by midnight.

The anti-tank gunners in the forward area had wrecked their guns and moved back in their own vehicles; only the guns of 33 Battery and possibly some of 31 and 32 Batteries were taken back.

The regiments of artillery had also been withdrawing. Fourth Field Regiment was to have moved out about 7.30 p.m., but because there were both ammunition and targets Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson had kept his guns firing until about 9.30 p.m. The crews had then emptied recuperators, removed breech blocks and hastened to their trucks, which were now in the stream of traffic moving south. About 9.15 p.m. 5 Field Regiment had wrecked its guns, the men then marching back to the vehicles and all being clear by 10.30 p.m. C Troop (Captain **Snadden** ¹) was to have been part of the brigade rearguard, but so much time was lost attempting to bring the trucks forward against the outgoing traffic that the guns had to be left and the men taken south. Sixth Field Regiment, having destroyed all its guns except one, had moved back about 9 p.m. The remaining gun had been retained in an anti-tank role, but when an enemy battery on Euboea opened fire the crew had been ordered to follow up the main convoy.

The brigade rearguard waited until 12.15 a.m., 25 April, and then, still undisturbed, hurried after the battalions.

Some eight miles east of **Molos** at **Cape Knimis** the divisional rearguard, **Clifton Force**, ² was waiting to cover the withdrawal. In the early part of the day it had been shot up by the *Luftwaffe* and Major **Jenkins**, ³ OC 34 Anti-Tank Battery, had been mortally

¹ Maj J. P. Snadden, MC; Wellington; born Te Kuiti, 24 May 1913; salesman; 2 i/c 5 Fd Regt Mar–Oct 1944; twice wounded.

² Div Cav, Carrier Pls **5 Bde**, one bty 2 RHA, 34 Bty 7 A-Tk Regt, one bty 102 A-Tk Regt.

³ **Maj A. V. Jenkins**; born NZ 30 May 1903; civil servant; died of wounds 26 Apr 1941.

wounded, but once the light faded the attacks stopped and the next worry for the troops was the late withdrawal of 6 Brigade. Once it did appear, every vehicle on the road was moving south, with Clifton urging each group to use its lights and see that no time was wasted.

To add to the excitement, about 11 p.m. a small boat was seen approaching the cape but there was no threat of a German landing. The new arrivals were a Greek and a member of 21 Battalion, who was hastily sent south in one of the passing trucks. After midnight the intervals between the convoys increased; Brigadier Barrowclough came through, and about an hour later Lieutenant-Colonel Page with his rearguard.

The engineers then began their work, **Clifton Force** moving back from demolition to demolition, collecting the two troops from the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment at the junction of the road from **Brallos** Pass and at dawn reaching **Levadhia**. After the Australian engineers had demolished a bridge on the Delphi road, the rearguards moved south to **Thebes**, where there was a covering force from elements of 1 Armoured Brigade. Here **Clifton Force** was instructed to follow 6 Brigade through the **Kriekouki** Pass and the lines of 4 Brigade.

Almost all **W Force** was now south of 4 Brigade at **Kriekouki**. Units from 1 Armoured Brigade were still about **Thebes** and a small group was covering the northern flank at **Khalkis**: C Company 1 Rangers, A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** and N Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery. The New Zealand units had attempted to move back from the **Cape Knimis** area during daylight but had been forced off the road by the *Luftwaffe*. Suffering casualties and losing vehicles, they had not reached **Khalkis**

until late that night.

TO GREECE

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION OF MOLOS

The German Occupation of Molos

At that time—about midnight 24–25 April—the Germans at **Thermopylae** had been preparing yet another attack. The forward company of tanks had been roughly handled but the rest of *I/31 Panzer Regiment* had been rushed forward to relieve it. The commander, who had received no other orders, was not eager to risk the dangers of a night attack but Baacke, the infantry captain, was still aggressive. He sent his companies forward and they reported that **Molos** was clear of British troops. The tanks soon advanced but there was no immediate rush in pursuit of 6 Brigade; the German plans at this stage did not go beyond the capture of **Molos** and the movement forward of the main body from **Lamia**.

When the campaign was over the German commanders began a paper war in which infantry and armour competed for the battle honours. Baacke, the infantry captain, was awarded the Knight's Cross to the Iron Cross; his divisional commander grudgingly admitted that the tanks had 'arrived just at the right time to exert a favourable influence on the advance guard's attack.'¹ The commander of *5 Panzer Regiment* declared that *I/31 Panzer Regiment* had broken through 'the foremost enemy gun positions and fought the second line of guns to a standstill so that the enemy lost many killed, wounded and PW and fled from the position after nightfall. Not until nightfall when the fighting was over, did the advance guard of the mountain division (cyclists) appear and clear **Molos**.'² The heated argument even reached the level of Army Headquarters. More important to 6 New Zealand Brigade and the supporting artillery was the fact that they had been able to make a smooth withdrawal and that 'out of 18 tanks in the action 12 were total losses, and ... out of 70 men (all ranks) 7 were killed and 22 wounded.'³ *The 1/61 Anti-Aircraft Regiment and 704 Heavy Infantry Gun Company*

had between them four killed and seven wounded. *Baacke Group* had lost 15 killed and 48 wounded, mainly from shellfire.

¹ *6 Mtn Div to XVIII Corps, 16 Sep 1941.*

² *5 Pz Div Comd to XXXX Corps Comd, 26 Apr 1941.*

³ *Ibid.*

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 18 – THE FIRST STAGES OF THE EVACUATION

CHAPTER 18

The First Stages of the Evacuation

ON 23 April Headquarters **Anzac Corps** was in the **Levadhia** area until dusk, when it moved back to **Mandra** in the vicinity of **Elevisis**. Before then General Blamey had reported to General Wilson in **Athens** and had been ordered to leave for **Alexandria** at five o'clock next morning. He had also been told that the course of the campaign would probably necessitate some revision of the embarkation plans.

The activity of the *Luftwaffe* over the coast of southern **Greece** was the deciding factor. On 21–22 April twenty-three vessels, including two hospital ships and one Greek destroyer, had been destroyed. The final disaster was the destruction ¹ that evening, 23 April, of the Hurricanes at **Argos**. As this meant that **W Force** would have to be evacuated without air cover new plans had to be drawn up. When possible, fast-moving destroyers must act as transports. If less use was made of the beaches in **Attica** and more of those in the **Peloponnese**, the embarkations would be safer and the sea voyage to **Crete** and to **Egypt** much shorter. If there was an early departure from each beach the convoys could possibly reach by daylight the areas screened by the fighter aircraft operating from the airfields in **Crete**.

On 24 April the new timetable was produced. No troops would leave from **Theodhora** and 16 and 17 Australian Brigades, instead of embarking from **Megara**, would move to the **Argos** area and probably from there to **Kalamata**, a port in the extreme south of the **Peloponnese**.

These changes necessitated many new orders. Sixth Brigade was instructed that it must maintain a rearguard covering the road north of **Tatoi** until 6 p.m. on 26–27 April, the night of its embarkation from **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. British officers were sent south to ensure the support of the Greek commanders at **Corinth** and **Tripolis**; a senior officer was appointed to control the **Peloponnese**; and a force was hastily organised for the defence of the **Corinth Canal**. ²

The embarkation would be as follows:



German forces cross the Pinios River—a page from a German magazine

German forces cross the Pinios River— a page from a German magazine

The German text read:

A BRIDGE IS FORMED

The Pinios Bridge in the Vale of **Tempe has been blown up.**

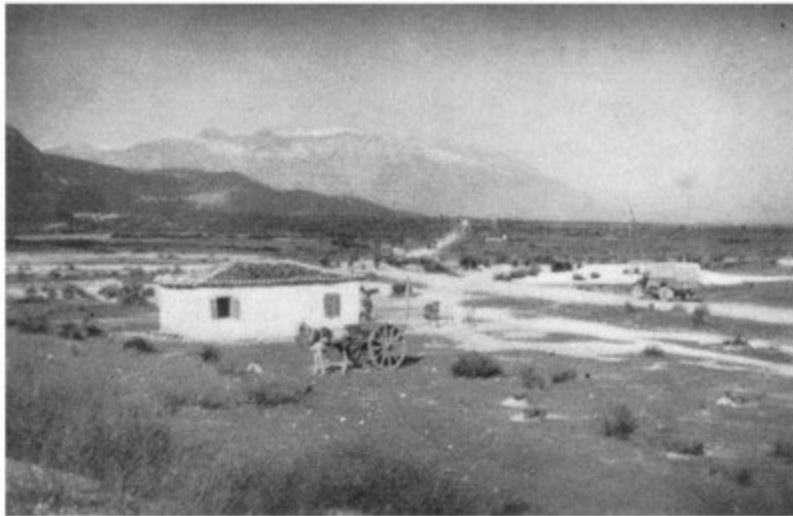
Rubber dinghies have taken the first attacking troops over. Foot soldiers and light vehicles can now get across.

By heavy travel on muddy roads, over swampy fields, through the narrow defile by **Pandeleimon and along the railway embankment the bridging column reaches the Pinios. While the sappers build a new bridge near the one destroyed, vehicles are drawn across on a quickly set up ferry. Only a few hours later supplies roll over the new bridge.**



German reconnaissance plane in the Molos area

German reconnaissance plane in the Molos area



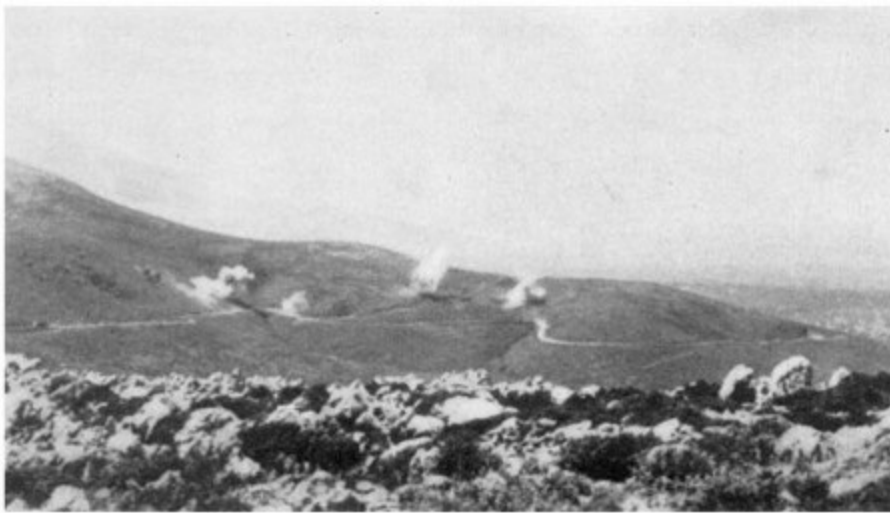
Thermopylae

Thermopylae



Sunrise near Kriekouki

Sunrise near Kriekouki



Kriekouki. Shelling disperses the enemy advanced guard

Kriekouki. Shelling disperses the enemy advanced guard



Brigadier Puttick's map of Attica showing 4 Brigade positions at Porto Rafti ('D' Beach)

Brigadier Puttick's map of Attica showing 4 Brigade positions at Porto Rafti ('D' Beach)

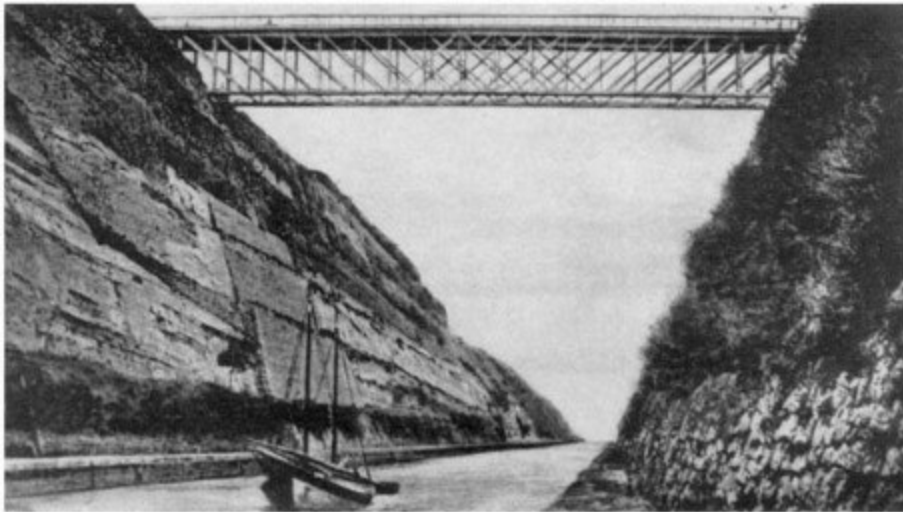


Athens waves goodbye. A convoy passes through the city during the withdrawal

Athens waves goodbye. A convoy passes through the city during the withdrawal



Porto Rafti
Porto Rafti



Corinth Bridge
Corinth Bridge



A Sunderland flying boat lies off the coast of Greece
A Sunderland flying boat lies off the coast of Greece



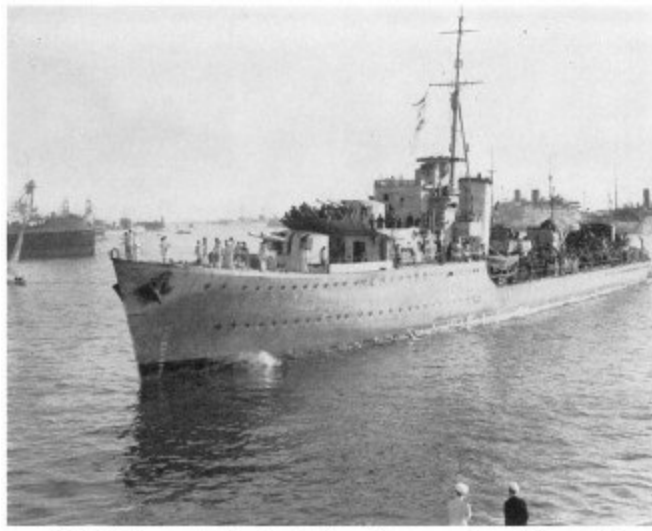
Commanders' conference near Monemvasia. Standing against the car is General Freyberg. Colonel Stewart (dark glasses) sits in the centre with his back to the car and seated on the bumper is Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry

Commanders' conference near [Monemvasia](#). Standing against the car is [General Freyberg](#). Colonel Stewart (dark glasses) sits in the centre with his back to the car and seated on the bumper is Lieutenant- Colonel Gentry



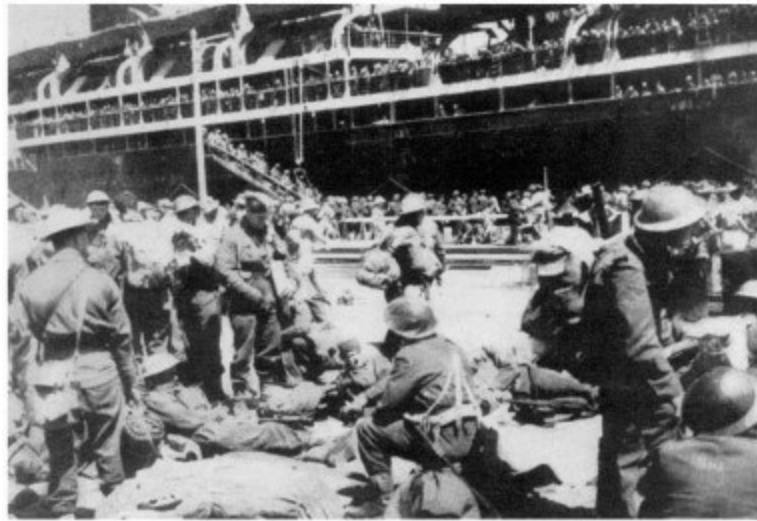
New Zealand troops arrive at Suda Bay, Crete

New Zealand troops arrive at [Suda Bay, Crete](#)



HMAS *Nizam*, carrying troops from Greece, arrives at Alexandria

HMAS *Nizam*, carrying troops from Greece, arrives at Alexandria



The *Salween* disembarks troops at Alexandria

The *Salween* disembarks troops at Alexandria

¹ See pp. 378– 80.

² See pp. 413– 22.

**Beach
'C'
Rafina Porto
Rafti**

**Beach
'D'**

**Beach
'P'
Megara Navplion**

**Beach
'S'**

**Beach
'T'
E
Navplion**

**Beach
'Z'**

**Kalamata Yithion and
Plitra**

**Beaches
'X' and 'N'**

D1

5 Bde

HQ Anzac

24– 25 April		(4000)		Corps Base Details RAF (5000)			
D2 25– 26 April		19 Aust Bde Gp (4000) Dets 1 Armd Bde (500) Wounded (1000)					
D3 26– 27 April	6 NZ Bde (3000)	6 NZ Bde (3000) 1 Armd Bde (400)	4 NZ Bde (4000)	Base Details 3 R Tanks 4 (H) (6000)	Base L of C (2000)	16–17 Aust Bde (4000) Base Details	Stragglers warned to go to these beaches. Numbers not known, but hoped to be small.

The 24th was also notable for several other incidents and decisions. The capitulation of the Greek Army was now definite; General Papagos resigned his command; and King George with some of his Ministers left in a flying boat for **Crete**. About midday Blamey reached **Alexandria** and impressed upon Admiral Cunningham the full seriousness of the situation; Headquarters **Anzac Corps** finally closed and Advanced Battle Headquarters **W Force** settled in at **Miloi** in the **Peloponnese**. In the afternoon General Mackay and his staff went to **Argos**, the latter leaving that night by cruiser from **Navplion** and the General early next morning in a Sunderland from **Miloi**.

General Freyberg had received identical orders for evacuation on the night of 24–25 April or 25–26 April, but he chose to disregard them. As he explained to Headquarters **W Force**, 6 Brigade had yet to break contact at **Thermopylae** and, even if it did so successfully, there were all

the hazards of a long withdrawal. In answer to his question about the command of the forces after his possible departure, he was told that the responsibility would be one for Movement Control, in the sense that Movement Control would handle the embarkation.

The explanation for this surprising statement is that when the instructions for the evacuation of Mackay and Freyberg were sent over from GHQ Middle East the last suggested night, 25–26 April, was to have seen all units, except the rearguard, in their lying-up areas awaiting embarkation. It seems that Middle East command was paying particular attention to the safety of the Dominion commanders.

Even so, the closing of Headquarters Anzac Corps does seem to have been somewhat premature. In fact on 23 April, when General Blamey announced the date to Brigadier Rowell, the latter had protested, saying that in view of ‘this changed situation, Anzac Corps headquarters should remain’.¹ The General had, however, insisted that the orders were to leave Greece. This meant that Brigadier Allen would have no specially selected staff to assist in the embarkation from Kalamata of the 16 and 17 Australian Brigade Group—seven battalions and two artillery regiments; that after 25 April,² when the evacuation plans were once again changed, the absence of Headquarters Anzac Corps increased the responsibility of General Freyberg³ and the already overburdened staff of W Force Headquarters.⁴

¹ Long, p. 151.

² See pp. 405– 6.

³ See pp. 406, 425, 473– 4.

⁴ See pp. 405– 7, 425.

The first ⁵ embarkations took place on the night of 24–25 April when the rearguards were still hastening south from **Thermopylae** and **Brallos Pass**. In his instructions Admiral Cunningham stated that material must not take precedence over men; the destroyers and the ‘Glen’ ships ⁶ would take their men to **Crete** and return for a second embarkation; troopships would sail direct to **Alexandria**.

At **Porto Rafti** ⁷ there appeared after dark the anti-aircraft cruiser **HMS Calcutta**, the cruiser **HMAS Perth** and the ‘Glen’ ship **HMS Glengyle** with the landing craft. Fifth Brigade Group had already come in from its widespread distribution area, so the transport vehicles were then destroyed and the men covered the last two miles under careful control from collecting area to assembly area, and finally to the point of embarkation. With them they took small packs, respirators, steel helmets, rifles, 100 rounds of ammunition, groundsheets and one blanket per man. The entrenching tools which had been brought by many had to be left behind.

Brigadier Hargest went aboard early and so impressed upon Captain Petrie of **HMS Glengyle** the urgency of the embarkation ⁸ that when the converted liner was full over 700 men were taken aboard **HMS Calcutta**. In all there were Headquarters 5 Brigade, 21, 22, 23 and 28 (Maori) Battalions, 19 Army Troops Company,

⁵ On the nights 22–23 and 23–24 April about 1300 base troops, British civilians and the 150 Germans captured at **Servia Pass** had left in small Greek vessels from **Piraeus**.

⁶ Three ‘Glen’ liners had been converted for use as assault landing ships; they had special landing craft: LCT (tanks), LCA (assault personnel) and LCM (mechanised vehicles).

⁷ Unit records often use the title **Marathon** for beaches at **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**—and sometimes **Rafina** for **Porto Rafti**. Naval records are the reliable authorities.

5 and 6 Field Ambulances, 4 Field Hygiene Section, the headquarters of New Zealand Division, Artillery, Engineers and Army Service Corps, less the commanders and small staffs, the Divisional Signals less C Section and detachments of A, B and D Sections, and the British units—Headquarters 234 Battery and D Troop 64 Medium Regiment. The ships sailed about 3.40 a.m. on 25 April—Anzac Day—and although they were attacked from the air after daylight no damage was done and the convoy reached Suda Bay in Crete at 4 p.m. The brigade group was then to have gone to Egypt, but as no shipping was available it was employed ¹ preparing the defences of the Maleme sector.

The evacuation had not, unfortunately, been complete. Some 500 men had been left on the beach, about half of them from the Supply Column, the rest from about ten other units, including 28 (Maori) Battalion, 19 Army Troops Company and 5 Field Ambulance. The Navy, however, came to their relief, crowding them aboard a tank landing craft and transporting them the 15 miles to Kea Island. The craft then sailed away, the crew hoping to collect them later but warning them to be prepared to find their own way to Crete. Thereafter the detachments, with Captain Love ² as OC Troops, waited anxiously for the Navy, well aware that there was a shortage of food and some doubts about their chances of evacuation. ³

Another group from 28 (Maori) Battalion had also been left on the beach. In the withdrawal the Regimental Sergeant-Major, Warrant Officer Wood, ⁴ had brought up the rear with six trucks on which he collected any Maoris stranded in broken-down vehicles. The party increased in numbers, but the frequent pauses so delayed the little convoy that it reached Athens after the brigade group had gone through to the Marathon area and had therefore to spend the night in the New Zealand Reinforcement Camp at Voula. When Wood learnt that 5 Brigade was leaving from Porto Rafti he took his trucks there, but the convoy had left; the party eventually embarked with 4 Brigade Group on

the night of 27–28 April.

From **Navplion**, a harbour south of **Corinth**, evacuation took place less smoothly. Plans had been made for the evacuation of 5000 men, but by 24 April there were some 7000–8000 men in the area, mostly base and **Royal Air Force** details but including Australian Corps headquarters, 6 Australian Division headquarters, 4 (**Durham**) Survey Regiment, 16 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery and

¹ See pp. 446– 7.

² **Lt-Col E. Te W. Love**, m.i.d.; born Picton, 18 May 1905; interpreter; CO 28 (Maori) Bn May–Jul 1942; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.

³ See p. 428.

⁴ **Capt A. C. Wood**, DCM; Wakefield; born **Nelson**, 24 Aug 1916; Regular soldier; wounded 11 Jul 1942.

some 150 Australian and New Zealand nursing sisters. There had been urgent problems of organisation, but embarkation had begun at 9.30 p.m. and proceeded smoothly until the ***Ulster Prince*** had run aground in the channel, limiting the evacuation for that night and denying the use of the wharves to the destroyers on succeeding nights. However, ten caiques, operated by the **Navy**, helped to relieve the embarkation problem and HM ships ***Phoebe***, ***Glenearn***, ***Voyager***, ***Stuart*** and ***Hyacinth*** left by 3 a.m. with 6685 men.

To explain the presence of the New Zealand nurses it is necessary to review the fortunes of 1 General Hospital. The majority of the officers and staff had left for Egypt on 19 April, but thirty orderlies were still attached to 26 British General Hospital and over fifty nurses had been left ¹ behind when the hospital ship ***Aba*** made its hurried departure from

Piraeus. On 22 April the nurses were instructed to move south by train, but the bombers had by then disorganised the railway system. Next morning, however, the party with 100 British and Australian nurses left for **Argos**, 120 miles to the south and near **Navplion**. Travelling that day and all night, they got clear and halted for breakfast some ten miles south of **Corinth**. Shortly afterwards one of the vehicles carrying nineteen New Zealand nurses overturned and all were injured, though not seriously. Some Yugoslavs gave assistance and eventually an Australian detachment, passing through with empty ambulances, took the party south until air raids forced a halt in a cemetery until nightfall. At 8.45 p.m. the convoy reached **Navplion** and the more badly injured were taken to the quay; the others walked to the embarkation point. Then, in an old caique, they were taken to HMS *Voyager*, one of the destroyers protecting the convoy, which reached **Crete**² the following afternoon, 25 April.

The thirty orderlies from 1 General Hospital who were attached to **26 General Hospital** at **Kifisia** continued with their duties until 24 April. They had been ordered to report at Force Headquarters that afternoon for instructions, but the bombing of **Piraeus** harbour kept them taking casualties from there to **Kifisia** and they did not report until 10.30 p.m. They were then sent south to **Navplion** and the majority were evacuated on the night of 26–27 April.

Earlier in the day, 24 April, an effort to embark from **Piraeus** had ended disastrously. The luxury yacht *Hellas* had appeared unexpectedly and, according to reports, could steam 18 knots and take 1000 passengers. As she was ready to sail after dark, loading had begun late that afternoon. Some 500 British civilians, mostly Maltese and Cypriots, went aboard and about 400 wounded and sick from 26 British and 2/5 Australian General Hospitals. With them was

¹ See pp. 367– 8.

² On 29 April the nurses left **Crete** in the *Ionic* and reached

E Section (Workshops) 4 RMT Company, which ever since 19 April had been operating in Athens with 4 Advanced Maintenance Depot, a British Army unit. The commander of the section, Captain Broberg, had been appointed officer in charge of troops embarking on the *Hellas*.

About 7 p.m., when the Merchant Navy officers from vessels sunk by enemy aircraft were deciding how to get the ship to Alexandria, she was bombed and set on fire. The only gangway was destroyed, passengers were caught in the burning cabins and eventually the ship rolled over and sank. The possible casualties were 500–700 men.

Staff-Sergeants Wilson¹ and Cooney² had organised rescue parties which did magnificent work, but over half the seventy-five men of E Section suffered in some way from this disaster. At least seven had been killed and the wounded, who were sent to 26 General Hospital at Kifisia, were afterwards taken prisoner. The others were taken to Daphni Camp, a collecting point from which E Section, now only about twenty strong, moved on 25 April to the Argos area. Stragglers brought the total up to about twenty-five. On the night of 26–27 April they moved over to ‘T’ Beach (Tolos) east of Navplion and were taken on a landing craft to the destroyer HMAS *Stuart*, from which they were transferred to HMS *Orion*, which landed them on Crete on 27 April. Others who were afterwards taken from a Piræus hospital to Argos, and from there to Kalamata,³ reached Crete with the Australian group and made the total of survivors from the Workshops section 31 out of 75.

¹ **WO II P. G. Wilson**, MM, m.i.d.; Wairoa; born Wairoa, 21 Sep 1905; foreman mechanic; p.w. 27 May 1941.

² **WO II D. L. Cooney**, m.i.d.; Alexandra; born Dunedin, 30 Jan 1912; motor mechanic; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³ See pp. 429–30.

25 April: The Second Revision of the Evacuation Plans

On the morning of 25 April **General Freyberg**, with Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry, his AA & QMG, had set out to find Headquarters **Anzac Corps**, which had been in the vicinity of **Eleusis**. Actually it had closed down and departed on the previous day, but the General was able to telephone **W Force** Headquarters in **Athens** and then set out to visit General Wilson.

He afterwards wrote:

What I saw on the comparatively short drive through to **Athens** filled me with concern; all the dumps of military stores, petrol, food and trucks that are part of the Base organisation of an Expeditionary Force were left completely unattended. There were numbers of Greeks looting everything that had been left. This disorganisation and appearance of almost desperation had not been evident in the forward areas. We moved through streets crowded with bewildered people. There were reports that the Germans were coming along the Yanina [Ioannina] road from the Albanian front, having completely broken through and barred the withdrawal of the force which had carried the war against **Italy** into **Albania**. It was with rather an uneasy feeling that I went into **Athens** wondering what attitude the Greeks would adopt towards the British troops and whether German Fifth Column would have an effect upon them. As a matter of fact, the attitude of the Greek population, both military and civil, was perfect. They were most courteous and eager to help us in any way and they appeared heartbroken that our efforts to help them had brought disaster upon our forces. ¹

In **Athens Freyberg** found Wilson in conference with Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman and the Joint Planning Staff. He was able to describe the situation in the north and to help in the adjustment of the embarkation plans. The position was serious. The panzer divisions were approaching from the north and the **Luftwaffe** was continuing to exploit

its mastery of the air. Drastic changes had therefore to be made.

At **Kriekouki** 4 New Zealand Brigade had to hold its rearguard positions for another twenty-four hours. On the eastern flank near **Tatoi** units from 1 Armoured Brigade would cover the approaches to **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. Sixth New Zealand Brigade which was to have had this task would then move to the **Peloponnese**. As the **Athens** area was now in close range of fighters and dive-bombers, only one more evacuation would take place from **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. The balance of the troops would be evacuated from the beaches west of **Athens** and the harbours in the **Peloponnese**. This meant that the timetable which was to have ended with the evacuation of five brigades and thousands of attached troops on the night of 26–27 April had now to be extended for three more nights.

On the night of 25–26 April 19 **Australian Brigade** would embark from **Megara** and not from the beaches east of **Athens**. No other units could be evacuated but there would be many adjustments of position. The New Zealand artillery and the forces already in the collecting areas would move to the lying-up areas for **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. Sixth New Zealand Brigade would cross the **Corinth Canal** and continue south towards **Tripolis**. Detachments from the New Zealand Division would move east to support the rearguard north of **Tatoi** and **Isthmus Force** at the **Corinth Canal** would come under the command of **General Freyberg**.

On the night of 26–27 April, after the departure of **Wilson** for **Crete**, **Freyberg** would command the forces in the **Peloponnese**. The artillery group and the eastern rearguard would embark from **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. Fourth New Zealand Brigade Group would withdraw to become the rearguard immediately south of the **Corinth Canal**. Base Details, 4 **Hussars** and 3 Royal Tank Regiment would embark from the **Navplion** beaches; 16–17 Australian Brigade Group would embark from **Kalamata** in the extreme south of the **Peloponnese**.

The subsequent withdrawal of the New Zealand troops and those under command would be directed 'with all possible speed' and in

‘approximately equal proportions’ to the beaches at **Monemvasia**, **Plitra**, **Yithion** and **Kalamata**. From there they would embark on the nights 28–29 and 29–30 April. Any other troops in the **Peloponnese** and those not evacuated from the **Navplion** beaches on the night of 26–27 April were to proceed ‘as quickly as possible’ to **Monemvasia**, **Plitra** and **Kalamata** for embarkation on the night of 28–29 April.

¹ GOC's report on the New Zealand Division in **Greece**, p. 27.

New Zealand Division during 25 April and Night 25-26 April

The movements of 4 and 6 Brigades were immediately adjusted according to these changes in the plan of evacuation. From the north, where 4 Brigade ¹ was preparing its defences at **Kriekouki**, the units for **Isthmus Force** ² went south to the canal area. The same morning, 25 April, 6 Brigade and the three artillery regiments came through from **Thermopylae**. The artillery, on orders from Brigadier Miles, continued to move south, following the twisting and winding highway through a world of pine-clad ridges to **Elevisis** and then following the highway eastwards into **Athens**. There the convoy was given a wonderful reception; the populace was charged with emotion, the men cheering and the women showering the trucks with flowers and saying ‘Thank you for your help’ and ‘Come again’. To the east of the city in the ‘**Marathon** area’ inland from **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**, the column was halted by the embarkation staff and the units were directed to lying-up areas, where they were to remain that night and all the next day, 26 April.

With 6 Brigade the withdrawal was one of successive adjustments and changes of plan. At daylight the rear of the convoy was still north of **Thebes**, but German air activity was not intense and the convoy passed through the village of **Kriekouki**, over the steep ridge now held by 4 Brigade and south beyond the dusty village of **Mazi**. Here in a dry, rock-strewn countryside cloaked with an extensive forest of young pine trees

the battalions took cover preparatory to moving to the neighbourhood of Tatoi to cover the beaches at **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. In fact the Brigadier and his staff had been on their way to study the new positions when they met **General Freyberg** returning from **Athens** with the news that the embarkation plans had been changed. The brigade was that night to go to the **Peloponnese** and spend the following day, 26 April, under cover a few miles to the south of the canal. The units under command were to continue on their way to the **Porto Rafti** area.

The battalion commanders and the Brigade Major then went south to select positions in the canal area. The route over the hills to **Elevisis** was uneventful but the journey westwards to the canal was disturbing. The view across the bay to Salamis was enchanting and the road above the cliffs was remarkable from an engineering point of view, but it was a death-trap for any large unit which attempted to use it during daylight. For miles it was strewn with wrecked trucks and discarded equipment.

That afternoon the brigade's role was changed once again. The battalions would hasten some 70 miles south of the canal to **Tripolis**, a town in the centre of the **Peloponnese** at the junction point of roads from Patrai, **Corinth** and **Monemvasia**. If the whole brigade could not get there by next morning, 26 April, detachments at least were to be sent forward to block the western approaches. So, as soon as it was dark, 6 Brigade was on the move. About midnight, 25–26 April, the battalion commanders were met at the **Corinth** Canal, the altered orders were explained to them and the long convoy carried on southwards towards **Argos**.

The same night Advanced Headquarters New Zealand Division moved south, going through **Argos** to the village of **Miloi** at which General Wilson had set up his headquarters.

¹ See pp. 433– 41.

² See pp. 400, 415– 16.

The Evacuation from Megara, night 25-26 and day 26 April

On the morning of 24 April **Allen Group** (16–17 Brigades) had halted near **Elevisis**, taking advantage of the olive groves and waiting to embark that night from the beaches at **Megara**. During the day, however, the overall plan had to be changed: ¹ the brigades would move across the **Corinth Canal** to the **Argos** area and probably from there to **Kalamata**. **Nineteenth Brigade Group**, the rearguard which was to come south that night, 24–25 April, from the **Thermopylae** line, would take cover near **Megara** on 25 April and embark from there on the night of 25–26 April.

As there were several groups already in that area, among them the **New Zealanders** from **Voula**, it was doubtful if all the troops could be embarked that night. Orders were therefore sent from General Wilson's headquarters instructing **Brigadier Vasey** to retain sufficient vehicles to transport the surplus to the **Marathon** beaches, from which they could be evacuated on the night of 26–27 April. Unfortunately, when the orders were received most of the vehicles had been wrecked, those remaining being sufficient for only 300 men.

¹ See p. 400– 1.

For those troops who had been several days in the area, 25 April was a difficult day. German aircraft were over in still greater strength and in the **New Zealand Convalescent Hospital** group some patients were inclined to be hysterical. However, the long-expected orders came through for embarkation, vehicles were wrecked and at 9 p.m. the men in groups of fifty walked out to join the **British** and **Australian** columns assembling on the two beaches. The convoy waited half a mile off shore, boats glided in to the beaches and the long columns slowly shuffled forward. **Nineteenth Australian Brigade Group** embarked successfully from one beach but the sick, the wounded and the miscellaneous companies from the other beach were less fortunate. On the orders of

Brigadier Vasey all fit soldiers had been taken off first. The worst cases of the wounded had then been moved but the breakdown of an LCT so delayed operations that by 2.30 a.m., when the last boat moved out, some 500 men, including the majority of the New Zealand group, were still on the beach. As all subsequent embarkation would be from the **Peloponnese**, they were advised to make their way as quickly as possible across the **Corinth Canal**.

Using twelve vehicles, including some of 4 Light Field Ambulance, RAMC, Captain A. N. Slater sent on some 200 of his patients. They were over the **Corinth Canal** by seven o'clock next morning but, unfortunately, their arrival coincided with the German parachute attack. Some of the ambulances were wrecked, others were driven south to safety, but the majority of the group were captured.

The walking wounded, hospital staff, dental group and base unit personnel—some 300 all told—left about 4.30 a.m., walking towards **Corinth** and hoping to be picked up later in the day by the returning vehicles. Major J. A. S. Mackenzie, Captain **Kirk**,¹ Lieutenants **Borrie**² and **McDonald**³ were with the wounded, Captain Slater and Lieutenant Foreman remaining to assist any patients who had not got away.⁴ When daylight came the column was strung out along the highway, with the forward group beyond the cliff road and overlooking the olive groves on the long narrow coastal strip leading to the canal. Aircraft were then racing low
over-

¹ Lt-Col G. R. Kirk, OBE, m.i.d.; born **Gisborne**, 18 Jun 1907; physician; RMO **20 Bn** 1939–40; physician **1 Gen Hosp** 1940–41; 1 Mob CCS 1942; in charge medical division **1 Gen Hosp**, Sep 1942–Jan 1945; died Dunedin, 31 Aug 1956

² Capt J. Borrie, MBE; Dunedin; born **Port Chalmers**, 22 Jan 1915; medical officer, Dunedin Hospital; medical officer **1 Gen Hosp** Feb–Apr 1941; p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

³ **Capt P. N. R. McDonald; New Plymouth; born Oamaru, 11 Sep 1897; accountant; 1 NZEF 1917–18 (Private, MG Corps); QM 1 Gen Hosp Feb 1940–Apr 1941; p.w. 26 Apr 1941.**

⁴ **Staff-Sergeant J. Russell of the Mobile Dental Section and 13 others got away to the Navplion area, failed to leave 'T' Beach but got away to Spetsai Island, thence to Milos Island, where on 9 May they were captured. See pp. 420– 1.**

head

, halting all movement, strafing the defences of the canal and, about 7 a.m., dropping the parachute units.

The more advanced of the walking wounded and those who were driving through from Athens or from 4 Brigade were immediately in danger of capture. Major Rattray, the New Zealand liaison officer at Headquarters, British Troops in Greece, Athens, was particularly unfortunate. After remaining in the city to arrange for the evacuation of many stray detachments, he had left with two vehicles, picking up many walking wounded and approaching the canal just before the attack developed. Strafing aircraft forced the party to take cover and before long paratroopers had surrounded and captured it. Those farther back along the cliff road had more time to deal with the situation. Captain Neale ¹ of 4 Field Ambulance had been forced to leave his vehicle and take cover, but risking air attacks he now returned with Captain Kirk to warn the detachments along the road, the party still at Megara and 4 Brigade Group at Kriekouki. Borrie, McDonald and those in the more forward sections of the scattered medical group were surrounded early that afternoon and taken to a collecting point about three miles east of the canal. Others not so far forward were able to return to Megara, where efforts were now being made to avoid capture.

After the walking party had moved off that morning the medical group under Captain Slater and the embarkation staff, under Lieutenant-Colonel R. Marnham, had been preparing to follow it up. But the news of

the parachute landings brought in by Kirk and also by Lieutenant **Baxter**² of the walking party had forced a change in their plans. The embarkation staff hired a caique and proposed to sail that night for **Crete**.

In the meantime Marnham and Captain Baker took possession of a truck, drove north and reached Headquarters 4 Brigade about 2 p.m. After describing the situation, so far as they knew it, they were sent back by Brigadier Puttick to investigate still further, to collect all the troops about **Megara** and to be prepared to join the 4 Brigade column when it passed through the area.

At **Megara** there were actually several groups: the embarkation staff, Captain Ritchie with men from the Reinforcement Camp, men from the Mobile Dental Section, medical officers and men from 1 General Hospital and an unknown number of walking wounded. It was decided that some from each group should embark for **Crete** in the caique; the others would row to Salamis Island and await a vessel which would be sent over from **Crete**. However, during

¹ Capt H. C. Neale; **Levin**; born **Nelson**, 20 Aug 1914; medical practitioner; medical officer **4 Fd Amb** Sep 1939–Apr 1941; p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

² Capt **B. Y. W. Baxter**; **Lower Hutt**; born **Timaru**, 15 Mar 1907; wool clerk; wounded 20 May 1941.

the afternoon Captains Slater and Neale and Lieutenant Foreman decided that it would be wiser to attempt to join 4 Brigade. They set out in salvaged vehicles with some forty walking wounded and orderlies from 1 General Hospital, but three miles east of **Megara** they were captured by some stray parachutists and taken back over the cliff road to the canal area. Just how these lone parachutists came to be so far east of the **Corinth Canal** has never been explained.

Those who remained to leave by sea were more fortunate. Because of a report that parachutists had landed near the beach, the caique sailed before dark and after five days sailing from island to island reached **Crete**. Lieutenants Porter and Baxter were on board as well as Captain Kirk, who had preferred the risks of a run across open country to the beach to the indefinite chances of an escape that night.

Another group, Lieutenants C. A. Morton and **Foot**¹ with 19 other ranks, had started off for **Athens** in a truck, but warnings about the parachute troops had brought them back to the coast, where they took over a caique and spent the night attempting to sail for **Crete**. The craft had to be beached next morning so the party broke up. But when a Greek reported that there would be an evacuation that night from **Rafina**, Morton, Foot and three others commandeered a bus and hastened to **Athens**. There they hired a taxi to **Rafina** and left on the night of 27–28 April.

At the same time Lieutenant-Colonel Marnham and Captain Baker had been attempting to carry out the task allotted to them by 4 Brigade Headquarters. On their way back to **Megara** they had, however, been captured by the paratroopers, who disarmed them but left them in their lorry while other prisoners were being sent back to **Corinth**. The Germans had then begun to select another load, but the resourceful Marnham, seizing his opportunity, had driven off round the corner and into the olive groves. Once clear they had made their way separately to 4 Brigade Headquarters, Marnham in the truck risking a drive through **Megara** and Baker moving round the coast. The Morton-Foot party was there inspecting a caique, but Baker was taken by some Greeks in an already overloaded vehicle to the **Elefsis** junction where Brigadier Puttick was now established. Marnham and Baker had then volunteered to return with four Bren carriers as a fighting patrol along the road through **Megara**. The Germans had withdrawn but there were several groups of New Zealanders in the area, among them Captain Ritchie with his party of about twelve men, and two men from B Company 19 Battalion who had come back from the canal area. They were picked up

and the overloaded carriers were driven back to **Elefsis**, the

¹ **Lt S. E. Foot**; born **Auckland**, 31 Aug 1915; bank clerk; killed in action 25 May 1941.

additional personnel being taken on to **Porto Rafti** and the normal crews remaining with the rearguard.

Other groups of which no record exists escaped, ¹ but the great majority of the men left about **Megara Beach** or along the highway were prisoners for the rest of the war. The medical officers, Slater, Foreman, Borrie and Neale, were taken to **Corinth** the following day, 27 April, by **Dr Bauer** of the parachute force. There through the efforts of the Greek Red Cross personnel, Miss Ariadne Massautti ² in particular, they established a hospital in the Ionian Palace Hotel. Shortly afterwards the dental group—Lieutenants Warren, ³ **Noakes**, ⁴ **Dodgshun** ⁵ and **Spencer** ⁶—were brought in as additional medical personnel. Food and equipment were obtained from the Greek Red Cross; Sergeant E. O. Jones ⁷ of 1 General Hospital appeared with twenty men from the prisoner-of-war camp in the Greek barracks; Private **Savery** ⁸ of the same unit was the sole attendant or self-appointed doctor for another twenty in the Grande Bretagne Hotel. In all 122 patients of many nationalities went through these hospitals before 10 May, when they were closed, the remaining patients and staff being taken to 2/5 Australian General Hospital at **Kokkinia**, a suburb of **Athens**. Thereafter their story is one of movement to **Salonika** and eventually to the prisoner-of-war camps in **Germany**.

¹ Two officers and 18 men, including Driver J. B. Morice of 1 Ammunition Company and Private W. T. Phillips of the Field Security Section, left in a motor boat with no rudder and a useless diesel engine. They were blown to Skaramanga, where the party broke up, Morice and Phillips taking to the hills and reaching **Athens**. With Greek assistance they remained until October, when they were assisted to escape to **Turkey**.

² She was later awarded the George Medal.

³ Capt J. Le B. Warren; Dunedin; born Auckland, 15 Mar 1916; dentist; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

⁴ Capt P. Noakes; Auckland; born Waihi, 20 Jun 1914; dentist; p.w. 27 Apr 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.

⁵ Capt J. T. Dodgshun, MBE; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 26 Apr 1915; dental surgeon; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

⁶ Capt R. D. Spencer; Wanganui; born Palmerston North, 25 Sep 1914; dentist; p.w Apr 1941.

⁷ WO II E. O. Jones; born NZ 16 Mar 1916; clerk; p.w. Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

⁸ Pte W. C. T. Savery; born Kent, England, 7 Jan 1900; waterside worker; p.w. 28 Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943; died 4 May 1956.

TO GREECE

[SECTION]

ON 23 April Headquarters **Anzac Corps** was in the **Levadhia** area until dusk, when it moved back to **Mandra** in the vicinity of **Elevisis**. Before then General Blamey had reported to General Wilson in **Athens** and had been ordered to leave for **Alexandria** at five o'clock next morning. He had also been told that the course of the campaign would probably necessitate some revision of the embarkation plans.

The activity of the *Luftwaffe* over the coast of southern **Greece** was the deciding factor. On 21–22 April twenty-three vessels, including two hospital ships and one Greek destroyer, had been destroyed. The final disaster was the destruction ¹ that evening, 23 April, of the Hurricanes at **Argos**. As this meant that **W Force** would have to be evacuated without air cover new plans had to be drawn up. When possible, fast-moving destroyers must act as transports. If less use was made of the beaches in **Attica** and more of those in the **Peloponnese**, the embarkations would be safer and the sea voyage to **Crete** and to Egypt much shorter. If there was an early departure from each beach the convoys could possibly reach by daylight the areas screened by the fighter aircraft operating from the airfields in **Crete**.

On 24 April the new timetable was produced. No troops would leave from **Theodhora** and 16 and 17 Australian Brigades, instead of embarking from **Megara**, would move to the **Argos** area and probably from there to **Kalamata**, a port in the extreme south of the **Peloponnese**.

These changes necessitated many new orders. Sixth Brigade was instructed that it must maintain a rearguard covering the road north of **Tatoi** until 6 p.m. on 26–27 April, the night of its embarkation from **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. British officers were sent south to ensure the support of the Greek commanders at **Corinth** and **Tripolis**; a senior officer was appointed to control the **Peloponnese**; and a force was hastily organised for the defence of the **Corinth Canal**. ²

The embarkation would be as follows:



German forces cross the Pinios River—a page from a German magazine

German forces cross the Pinios River— a page from a German magazine

The German text read:

A BRIDGE IS FORMED

The Pinios Bridge in the Vale of **Tempe has been blown up.**

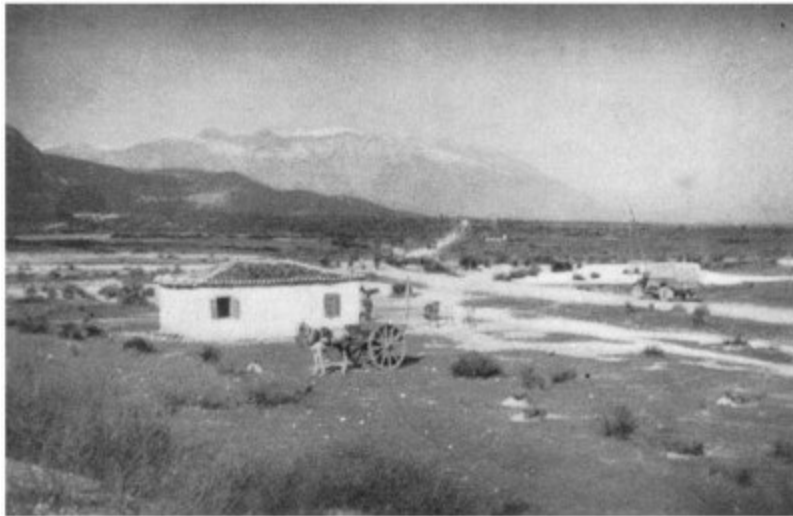
Rubber dinghies have taken the first attacking troops over. Foot soldiers and light vehicles can now get across.

By heavy travel on muddy roads, over swampy fields, through the narrow defile by **Pandeleimon and along the railway embankment the bridging column reaches the Pinios. While the sappers build a new bridge near the one destroyed, vehicles are drawn across on a quickly set up ferry. Only a few hours later supplies roll over the new bridge.**



German reconnaissance plane in the Molos area

German reconnaissance plane in the Molos area



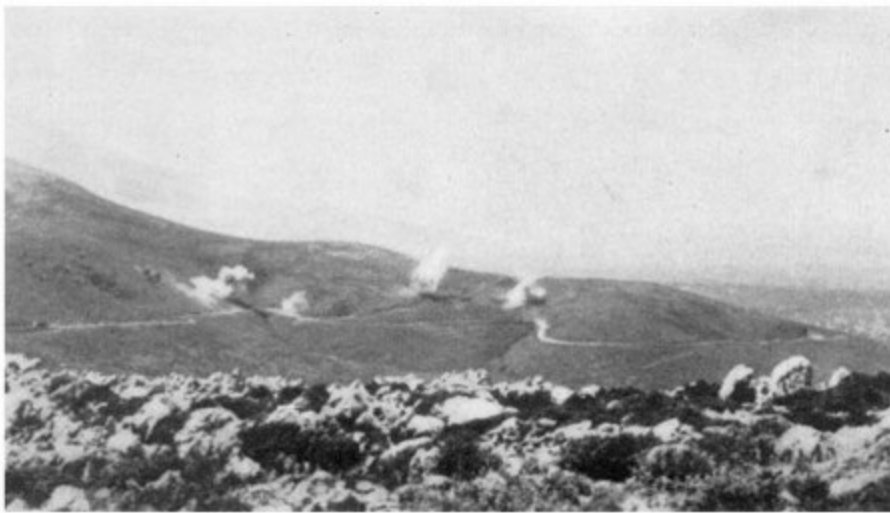
Thermopylae

Thermopylae



Sunrise near Kriekouki

Sunrise near Kriekouki



Kriekouki. Shelling disperses the enemy advanced guard

Kriekouki. Shelling disperses the enemy advanced guard



Brigadier Puttick's map of Attica showing 4 Brigade positions at Porto Rafti ('D' Beach)

Brigadier Puttick's map of Attica showing 4 Brigade positions at Porto Rafti ('D' Beach)

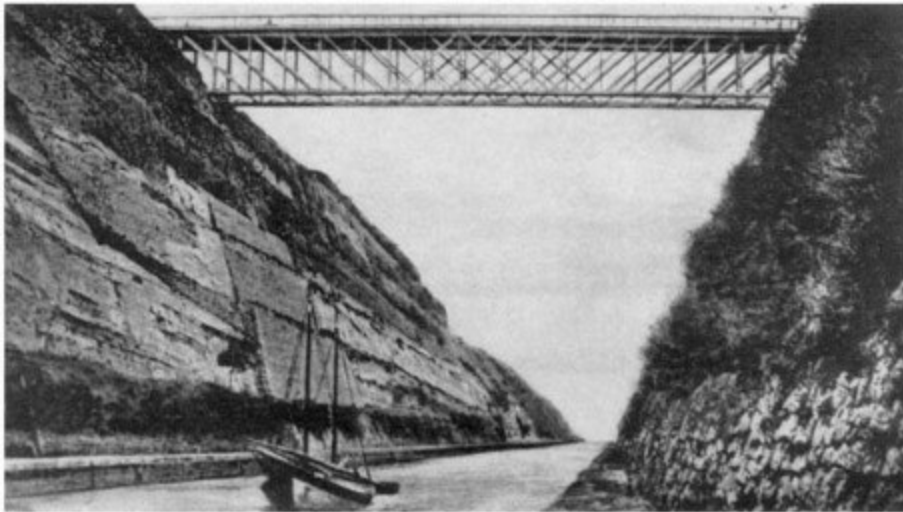


Athens waves goodbye. A convoy passes through the city during the withdrawal

Athens waves goodbye. A convoy passes through the city during the withdrawal



Porto Rafti
Porto Rafti



Corinth Bridge
Corinth Bridge



A Sunderland flying boat lies off the coast of Greece
A Sunderland flying boat lies off the coast of Greece



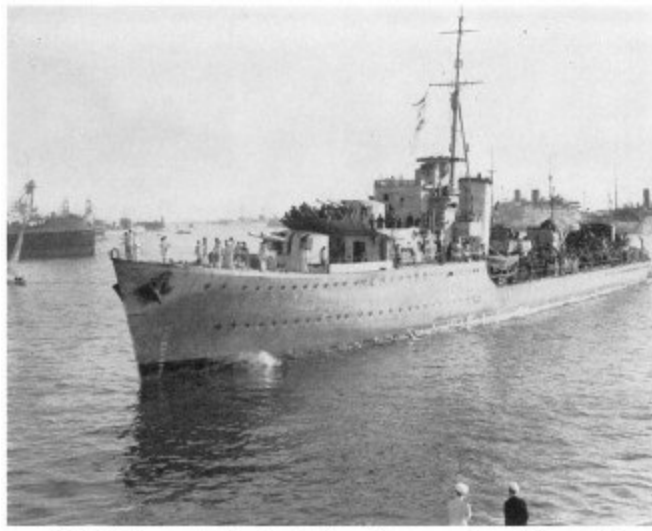
Commanders' conference near Monemvasia. Standing against the car is General Freyberg. Colonel Stewart (dark glasses) sits in the centre with his back to the car and seated on the bumper is Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry

Commanders' conference near [Monemvasia](#). Standing against the car is [General Freyberg](#). Colonel Stewart (dark glasses) sits in the centre with his back to the car and seated on the bumper is Lieutenant- Colonel Gentry



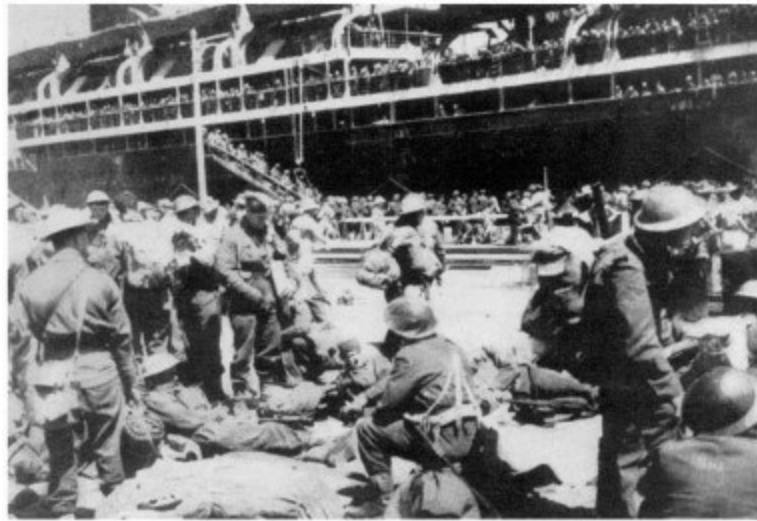
New Zealand troops arrive at Suda Bay, Crete

New Zealand troops arrive at [Suda Bay, Crete](#)



HMAS *Nizam*, carrying troops from Greece, arrives at Alexandria

HMAS *Nizam*, carrying troops from Greece, arrives at Alexandria



The *Salween* disembarks troops at Alexandria

The *Salween* disembarks troops at Alexandria

¹ See pp. 378– 80.

² See pp. 413– 22.

**Beach
'C'
Rafina Porto
Rafti**

**Beach
'D'**

**Beach
'P'
Megara Navplion**

**Beach
'S'**

**Beach
'T'
E
Navplion**

**Beach
'Z'**

**Kalamata Yithion and
Plitra**

**Beaches
'X' and 'N'**

D1

5 Bde

HQ Anzac

24– 25 April		(4000)		Corps Base Details RAF (5000)			
D2 25– 26 April		19 Aust Bde Gp (4000) Dets 1 Armd Bde (500) Wounded (1000)					
D3 26– 27 April	6 NZ Bde (3000)	6 NZ Bde (3000) 1 Armd Bde (400)	4 NZ Bde (4000)	Base Details 3 R Tanks 4 (H) (6000)	Base L of C (2000)	16–17 Aust Bde (4000) Base Details	Stragglers warned to go to these beaches. Numbers not known, but hoped to be small.

The 24th was also notable for several other incidents and decisions. The capitulation of the Greek Army was now definite; General Papagos resigned his command; and King George with some of his Ministers left in a flying boat for **Crete**. About midday Blamey reached **Alexandria** and impressed upon Admiral Cunningham the full seriousness of the situation; Headquarters **Anzac Corps** finally closed and Advanced Battle Headquarters **W Force** settled in at **Miloi** in the **Peloponnese**. In the afternoon General Mackay and his staff went to **Argos**, the latter leaving that night by cruiser from **Navplion** and the General early next morning in a Sunderland from **Miloi**.

General Freyberg had received identical orders for evacuation on the night of 24–25 April or 25–26 April, but he chose to disregard them. As he explained to Headquarters **W Force**, 6 Brigade had yet to break contact at **Thermopylae** and, even if it did so successfully, there were all

the hazards of a long withdrawal. In answer to his question about the command of the forces after his possible departure, he was told that the responsibility would be one for Movement Control, in the sense that Movement Control would handle the embarkation.

The explanation for this surprising statement is that when the instructions for the evacuation of Mackay and Freyberg were sent over from GHQ Middle East the last suggested night, 25–26 April, was to have seen all units, except the rearguard, in their lying-up areas awaiting embarkation. It seems that Middle East command was paying particular attention to the safety of the Dominion commanders.

Even so, the closing of Headquarters Anzac Corps does seem to have been somewhat premature. In fact on 23 April, when General Blamey announced the date to Brigadier Rowell, the latter had protested, saying that in view of ‘this changed situation, Anzac Corps headquarters should remain’.¹ The General had, however, insisted that the orders were to leave Greece. This meant that Brigadier Allen would have no specially selected staff to assist in the embarkation from Kalamata of the 16 and 17 Australian Brigade Group—seven battalions and two artillery regiments; that after 25 April,² when the evacuation plans were once again changed, the absence of Headquarters Anzac Corps increased the responsibility of General Freyberg³ and the already overburdened staff of W Force Headquarters.⁴

¹ Long, p. 151.

² See pp. 405– 6.

³ See pp. 406, 425, 473– 4.

⁴ See pp. 405– 7, 425.

TO GREECE

EMBARKATIONS AND MOVEMENTS ON THE NIGHT 24-25 APRIL

Embarkations and Movements on the night 24-25 April

The first ⁵ embarkations took place on the night of 24–25 April when the rearguards were still hastening south from **Thermopylae** and **Brallos Pass**. In his instructions Admiral Cunningham stated that material must not take precedence over men; the destroyers and the ‘Glen’ ships ⁶ would take their men to **Crete** and return for a second embarkation; troopships would sail direct to **Alexandria**.

At **Porto Rafti** ⁷ there appeared after dark the anti-aircraft cruiser **HMS Calcutta**, the cruiser **HMAS Perth** and the ‘Glen’ ship **HMS Glengyle** with the landing craft. Fifth Brigade Group had already come in from its widespread distribution area, so the transport vehicles were then destroyed and the men covered the last two miles under careful control from collecting area to assembly area, and finally to the point of embarkation. With them they took small packs, respirators, steel helmets, rifles, 100 rounds of ammunition, groundsheets and one blanket per man. The entrenching tools which had been brought by many had to be left behind.

Brigadier Hargest went aboard early and so impressed upon Captain Petrie of **HMS Glengyle** the urgency of the embarkation ⁸ that when the converted liner was full over 700 men were taken aboard **HMS Calcutta**. In all there were Headquarters 5 Brigade, 21, 22, 23 and 28 (Maori) Battalions, 19 Army Troops Company,

⁵ On the nights 22–23 and 23–24 April about 1300 base troops, British civilians and the 150 Germans captured at **Servia Pass** had left in small Greek vessels from **Piraeus**.

⁶ Three ‘Glen’ liners had been converted for use as assault landing ships; they had special landing craft: LCT (tanks), LCA

(assault personnel) and LCM (mechanised vehicles).

⁷ Unit records often use the title **Marathon** for beaches at **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**—and sometimes **Rafina** for **Porto Rafti**. Naval records are the reliable authorities.

⁸ 5700 is the number given in Cunningham's despatch.

5 and 6 Field Ambulances, 4 Field Hygiene Section, the headquarters of New Zealand Division, Artillery, Engineers and Army Service Corps, less the commanders and small staffs, the Divisional Signals less C Section and detachments of A, B and D Sections, and the British units—Headquarters 234 Battery and D Troop 64 Medium Regiment. The ships sailed about 3.40 a.m. on 25 April—Anzac Day—and although they were attacked from the air after daylight no damage was done and the convoy reached **Suda Bay** in **Crete** at 4 p.m. The brigade group was then to have gone to Egypt, but as no shipping was available it was employed ¹ preparing the defences of the **Maleme** sector.

The evacuation had not, unfortunately, been complete. Some 500 men had been left on the beach, about half of them from the Supply Column, the rest from about ten other units, including 28 (Maori) Battalion, 19 Army Troops Company and 5 Field Ambulance. The **Navy**, however, came to their relief, crowding them aboard a tank landing craft and transporting them the 15 miles to **Kea Island**. The craft then sailed away, the crew hoping to collect them later but warning them to be prepared to find their own way to **Crete**. Thereafter the detachments, with Captain **Love** ² as OC Troops, waited anxiously for the **Navy**, well aware that there was a shortage of food and some doubts about their chances of evacuation. ³

Another group from 28 (Maori) Battalion had also been left on the beach. In the withdrawal the Regimental Sergeant-Major, Warrant Officer **Wood**, ⁴ had brought up the rear with six trucks on which he collected any Maoris stranded in broken-down vehicles. The party

increased in numbers, but the frequent pauses so delayed the little convoy that it reached **Athens** after the brigade group had gone through to the **Marathon** area and had therefore to spend the night in the New Zealand Reinforcement Camp at **Voula**. When Wood learnt that 5 Brigade was leaving from **Porto Rafti** he took his trucks there, but the convoy had left; the party eventually embarked with 4 Brigade Group on the night of 27–28 April.

From **Navplion**, a harbour south of **Corinth**, evacuation took place less smoothly. Plans had been made for the evacuation of 5000 men, but by 24 April there were some 7000–8000 men in the area, mostly base and **Royal Air Force** details but including Australian Corps headquarters, 6 Australian Division headquarters, 4 (**Durham**) Survey Regiment, 16 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery and

¹ See pp. 446– 7.

² **Lt-Col E. Te W. Love**, m.i.d.; born Picton, 18 May 1905; interpreter; CO 28 (Maori) Bn May–Jul 1942; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.

³ See p. 428.

⁴ **Capt A. C. Wood**, DCM; Wakefield; born **Nelson**, 24 Aug 1916; Regular soldier; wounded 11 Jul 1942.

some 150 Australian and New Zealand nursing sisters. There had been urgent problems of organisation, but embarkation had begun at 9.30 p.m. and proceeded smoothly until the **Ulster Prince** had run aground in the channel, limiting the evacuation for that night and denying the use of the wharves to the destroyers on succeeding nights. However, ten caiques, operated by the **Navy**, helped to relieve the embarkation problem and HM ships **Phoebe**, **Glenearn**, **Voyager**, **Stuart** and **Hyacinth** left by 3 a.m. with 6685 men.

To explain the presence of the New Zealand nurses it is necessary to review the fortunes of 1 General Hospital. The majority of the officers and staff had left for Egypt on 19 April, but thirty orderlies were still attached to 26 British General Hospital and over fifty nurses had been left ¹ behind when the hospital ship *Aba* made its hurried departure from **Piraeus**. On 22 April the nurses were instructed to move south by train, but the bombers had by then disorganised the railway system. Next morning, however, the party with 100 British and Australian nurses left for **Argos**, 120 miles to the south and near **Navplion**. Travelling that day and all night, they got clear and halted for breakfast some ten miles south of **Corinth**. Shortly afterwards one of the vehicles carrying nineteen New Zealand nurses overturned and all were injured, though not seriously. Some Yugoslavs gave assistance and eventually an Australian detachment, passing through with empty ambulances, took the party south until air raids forced a halt in a cemetery until nightfall. At 8.45 p.m. the convoy reached **Navplion** and the more badly injured were taken to the quay; the others walked to the embarkation point. Then, in an old caique, they were taken to HMS *Voyager*, one of the destroyers protecting the convoy, which reached **Crete** ² the following afternoon, 25 April.

The thirty orderlies from 1 General Hospital who were attached to **26 General Hospital** at **Kifisia** continued with their duties until 24 April. They had been ordered to report at Force Headquarters that afternoon for instructions, but the bombing of **Piraeus** harbour kept them taking casualties from there to **Kifisia** and they did not report until 10.30 p.m. They were then sent south to **Navplion** and the majority were evacuated on the night of 26–27 April.

Earlier in the day, 24 April, an effort to embark from **Piraeus** had ended disastrously. The luxury yacht *Hellas* had appeared unexpectedly and, according to reports, could steam 18 knots and take 1000 passengers. As she was ready to sail after dark, loading had begun late that afternoon. Some 500 British civilians, mostly Maltese and Cypriots, went aboard and about 400 wounded and sick from 26 British and 2/5

¹ See pp. 367– 8.

² On 29 April the nurses left **Crete** in the *Ionic* and reached **Alexandria** on 1 May. See p. 447.

E Section (Workshops) 4 RMT Company, which ever since 19 April had been operating in **Athens** with 4 Advanced Maintenance Depot, a British Army unit. The commander of the section, Captain Broberg, had been appointed officer in charge of troops embarking on the *Hellas*.

About 7 p.m., when the Merchant Navy officers from vessels sunk by enemy aircraft were deciding how to get the ship to **Alexandria**, she was bombed and set on fire. The only gangway was destroyed, passengers were caught in the burning cabins and eventually the ship rolled over and sank. The possible casualties were 500–700 men.

Staff-Sergeants **Wilson**¹ and **Cooney**² had organised rescue parties which did magnificent work, but over half the seventy-five men of **E Section** suffered in some way from this disaster. At least seven had been killed and the wounded, who were sent to 26 General Hospital at **Kifisia**, were afterwards taken prisoner. The others were taken to Daphni Camp, a collecting point from which **E Section**, now only about twenty strong, moved on 25 April to the **Argos** area. Stragglers brought the total up to about twenty-five. On the night of 26–27 April they moved over to ‘**T**’ Beach (**Tolos**) east of **Navplion** and were taken on a landing craft to the destroyer HMAS *Stuart*, from which they were transferred to HMS *Orion*, which landed them on **Crete** on 27 April. Others who were afterwards taken from a **Piræus** hospital to **Argos**, and from there to **Kalamata**,³ reached **Crete** with the Australian group and made the total of survivors from the Workshops section 31 out of 75.

¹ **WO II P. G. Wilson**, MM, m.i.d.; Wairoa; born Wairoa, 21 Sep

1905; foreman mechanic; p.w. 27 May 1941.

² WO II D. L. Cooney, m.i.d.; Alexandra; born Dunedin, 30 Jan 1912; motor mechanic; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³ See pp. 429– 30.

TO GREECE

25 APRIL: THE SECOND REVISION OF THE EVACUATION PLANS

25 April: The Second Revision of the Evacuation Plans

On the morning of 25 April **General Freyberg**, with Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry, his AA & QMG, had set out to find Headquarters **Anzac Corps**, which had been in the vicinity of **Eleusis**. Actually it had closed down and departed on the previous day, but the General was able to telephone **W Force** Headquarters in **Athens** and then set out to visit General Wilson.

He afterwards wrote:

What I saw on the comparatively short drive through to **Athens** filled me with concern; all the dumps of military stores, petrol, food and trucks that are part of the Base organisation of an Expeditionary Force were left completely unattended. There were numbers of Greeks looting everything that had been left. This disorganisation and appearance of almost desperation had not been evident in the forward areas. We moved through streets crowded with bewildered people. There were reports that the Germans were coming along the Yanina [Ioannina] road from the Albanian front, having completely broken through and barred the withdrawal of the force which had carried the war against **Italy** into **Albania**. It was with rather an uneasy feeling that I went into **Athens** wondering what attitude the Greeks would adopt towards the British troops and whether German Fifth Column would have an effect upon them. As a matter of fact, the attitude of the Greek population, both military and civil, was perfect. They were most courteous and eager to help us in any way and they appeared heartbroken that our efforts to help them had brought disaster upon our forces. ¹

In **Athens Freyberg** found Wilson in conference with Rear- Admiral Baillie-Grohman and the Joint Planning Staff. He was able to describe the situation in the north and to help in the adjustment of the

embarkation plans. The position was serious. The panzer divisions were approaching from the north and the *Luftwaffe* was continuing to exploit its mastery of the air. Drastic changes had therefore to be made.

At **Kriekouki** 4 New Zealand Brigade had to hold its rearguard positions for another twenty-four hours. On the eastern flank near **Tatoi** units from 1 Armoured Brigade would cover the approaches to **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. Sixth New Zealand Brigade which was to have had this task would then move to the **Peloponnese**. As the **Athens** area was now in close range of fighters and dive-bombers, only one more evacuation would take place from **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. The balance of the troops would be evacuated from the beaches west of **Athens** and the harbours in the **Peloponnese**. This meant that the timetable which was to have ended with the evacuation of five brigades and thousands of attached troops on the night of 26–27 April had now to be extended for three more nights.

On the night of 25–26 April **19 Australian Brigade** would embark from **Megara** and not from the beaches east of **Athens**. No other units could be evacuated but there would be many adjustments of position. The New Zealand artillery and the forces already in the collecting areas would move to the lying-up areas for **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. Sixth New Zealand Brigade would cross the **Corinth Canal** and continue south towards **Tripolis**. Detachments from the New Zealand Division would move east to support the rearguard north of **Tatoi** and **Isthmus Force** at the **Corinth Canal** would come under the command of **General Freyberg**.

On the night of 26–27 April, after the departure of **Wilson** for **Crete**, **Freyberg** would command the forces in the **Peloponnese**. The artillery group and the eastern rearguard would embark from **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. Fourth New Zealand Brigade Group would withdraw to become the rearguard immediately south of the **Corinth Canal**. Base Details, **4 Hussars** and **3 Royal Tank Regiment** would embark from the **Navplion** beaches; **16–17 Australian Brigade Group** would embark from **Kalamata** in the extreme south of the **Peloponnese**.

The subsequent withdrawal of the New Zealand troops and those under command would be directed 'with all possible speed' and in 'approximately equal proportions' to the beaches at **Monemvasia**, **Plitra**, **Yithion** and **Kalamata**. From there they would embark on the nights 28–29 and 29–30 April. Any other troops in the **Peloponnese** and those not evacuated from the **Navplion** beaches on the night of 26–27 April were to proceed 'as quickly as possible' to **Monemvasia**, **Plitra** and **Kalamata** for embarkation on the night of 28–29 April.

¹ GOC's report on the New Zealand Division in **Greece**, p. 27.

TO GREECE

NEW ZEALAND DIVISION DURING 25 APRIL AND NIGHT 25-26 APRIL

New Zealand Division during 25 April and Night 25-26 April

The movements of 4 and 6 Brigades were immediately adjusted according to these changes in the plan of evacuation. From the north, where 4 Brigade ¹ was preparing its defences at **Kriekouki**, the units for **Isthmus Force** ² went south to the canal area. The same morning, 25 April, 6 Brigade and the three artillery regiments came through from **Thermopylae**. The artillery, on orders from Brigadier Miles, continued to move south, following the twisting and winding highway through a world of pine-clad ridges to **Elevisis** and then following the highway eastwards into **Athens**. There the convoy was given a wonderful reception; the populace was charged with emotion, the men cheering and the women showering the trucks with flowers and saying 'Thank you for your help' and 'Come again'. To the east of the city in the ' **Marathon** area' inland from **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**, the column was halted by the embarkation staff and the units were directed to lying-up areas, where they were to remain that night and all the next day, 26 April.

With 6 Brigade the withdrawal was one of successive adjustments and changes of plan. At daylight the rear of the convoy was still north of **Thebes**, but German air activity was not intense and the convoy passed through the village of **Kriekouki**, over the steep ridge now held by 4 Brigade and south beyond the dusty village of **Mazi**. Here in a dry, rock-strewn countryside cloaked with an extensive forest of young pine trees the battalions took cover preparatory to moving to the neighbourhood of **Tatoi** to cover the beaches at **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**. In fact the Brigadier and his staff had been on their way to study the new positions when they met **General Freyberg** returning from **Athens** with the news that the embarkation plans had been changed. The brigade was that night to go to the **Peloponnese** and spend the following day, 26 April,

under cover a few miles to the south of the canal. The units under command were to continue on their way to the **Porto Rafti** area.

The battalion commanders and the Brigade Major then went south to select positions in the canal area. The route over the hills to **Elevisis** was uneventful but the journey westwards to the canal was disturbing. The view across the bay to Salamis was enchanting and the road above the cliffs was remarkable from an engineering point of view, but it was a death-trap for any large unit which attempted to use it during daylight. For miles it was strewn with wrecked trucks and discarded equipment.

That afternoon the brigade's role was changed once again. The battalions would hasten some 70 miles south of the canal to **Tripolis**, a town in the centre of the **Peloponnese** at the junction point of roads from Patrai, **Corinth** and **Monemvasia**. If the whole brigade could not get there by next morning, 26 April, detachments at least were to be sent forward to block the western approaches. So, as soon as it was dark, 6 Brigade was on the move. About midnight, 25–26 April, the battalion commanders were met at the **Corinth** Canal, the altered orders were explained to them and the long convoy carried on southwards towards **Argos**.

The same night Advanced Headquarters New Zealand Division moved south, going through **Argos** to the village of **Miloi** at which General Wilson had set up his headquarters.

¹ See pp. 433– 41.

² See pp. 400, 415– 16.

TO GREECE

THE EVACUATION FROM MEGARA, NIGHT 25-26 AND DAY 26 APRIL

The Evacuation from Megara, night 25-26 and day 26 April

On the morning of 24 April **Allen Group** (16–17 Brigades) had halted near **Eleusis**, taking advantage of the olive groves and waiting to embark that night from the beaches at **Megara**. During the day, however, the overall plan had to be changed: ¹ the brigades would move across the **Corinth Canal** to the **Argos** area and probably from there to **Kalamata**. **Nineteenth Brigade Group**, the rearguard which was to come south that night, 24–25 April, from the **Thermopylae** line, would take cover near **Megara** on 25 April and embark from there on the night of 25–26 April.

As there were several groups already in that area, among them the **New Zealanders** from **Voula**, it was doubtful if all the troops could be embarked that night. Orders were therefore sent from **General Wilson's** headquarters instructing **Brigadier Vasey** to retain sufficient vehicles to transport the surplus to the **Marathon** beaches, from which they could be evacuated on the night of 26–27 April. Unfortunately, when the orders were received most of the vehicles had been wrecked, those remaining being sufficient for only 300 men.

¹ See p. 400– 1.

For those troops who had been several days in the area, 25 April was a difficult day. German aircraft were over in still greater strength and in the **New Zealand Convalescent Hospital** group some patients were inclined to be hysterical. However, the long-expected orders came through for embarkation, vehicles were wrecked and at 9 p.m. the men in groups of fifty walked out to join the **British** and **Australian** columns assembling on the two beaches. The convoy waited half a mile off shore, boats glided in to the beaches and the long columns slowly shuffled forward. **Nineteenth Australian Brigade Group** embarked successfully

from one beach but the sick, the wounded and the miscellaneous companies from the other beach were less fortunate. On the orders of Brigadier Vasey all fit soldiers had been taken off first. The worst cases of the wounded had then been moved but the breakdown of an LCT so delayed operations that by 2.30 a.m., when the last boat moved out, some 500 men, including the majority of the New Zealand group, were still on the beach. As all subsequent embarkation would be from the **Peloponnese**, they were advised to make their way as quickly as possible across the **Corinth Canal**.

Using twelve vehicles, including some of 4 Light Field Ambulance, RAMC, Captain A. N. Slater sent on some 200 of his patients. They were over the **Corinth Canal** by seven o'clock next morning but, unfortunately, their arrival coincided with the German parachute attack. Some of the ambulances were wrecked, others were driven south to safety, but the majority of the group were captured.

The walking wounded, hospital staff, dental group and base unit personnel—some 300 all told—left about 4.30 a.m., walking towards **Corinth** and hoping to be picked up later in the day by the returning vehicles. Major J. A. S. Mackenzie, Captain **Kirk**,¹ Lieutenants **Borrie**² and **McDonald**³ were with the wounded, Captain Slater and Lieutenant Foreman remaining to assist any patients who had not got away.⁴ When daylight came the column was strung out along the highway, with the forward group beyond the cliff road and overlooking the olive groves on the long narrow coastal strip leading to the canal. Aircraft were then racing low
over-

¹ Lt-Col G. R. Kirk, OBE, m.i.d.; born **Gisborne**, 18 Jun 1907; physician; RMO **20 Bn** 1939–40; physician **1 Gen Hosp** 1940–41; **1 Mob CCS** 1942; in charge medical division **1 Gen Hosp**, Sep 1942–Jan 1945; died Dunedin, 31 Aug 1956

² Capt J. Borrie, MBE; Dunedin; born **Port Chalmers**, 22 Jan

1915; medical officer, Dunedin Hospital; medical officer 1 Gen Hosp Feb–Apr 1941; p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

³ Capt P. N. R. McDonald; New Plymouth; born Oamaru, 11 Sep 1897; accountant; 1 NZEF 1917–18 (Private, MG Corps); QM 1 Gen Hosp Feb 1940–Apr 1941; p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

⁴ Staff-Sergeant J. Russell of the Mobile Dental Section and 13 others got away to the Navplion area, failed to leave 'T' Beach but got away to Spetsai Island, thence to Milos Island, where on 9 May they were captured. See pp. 420– 1.

head

, halting all movement, strafing the defences of the canal and, about 7 a.m., dropping the parachute units.

The more advanced of the walking wounded and those who were driving through from Athens or from 4 Brigade were immediately in danger of capture. Major Rattray, the New Zealand liaison officer at Headquarters, British Troops in Greece, Athens, was particularly unfortunate. After remaining in the city to arrange for the evacuation of many stray detachments, he had left with two vehicles, picking up many walking wounded and approaching the canal just before the attack developed. Strafing aircraft forced the party to take cover and before long paratroopers had surrounded and captured it. Those farther back along the cliff road had more time to deal with the situation. Captain Neale ¹ of 4 Field Ambulance had been forced to leave his vehicle and take cover, but risking air attacks he now returned with Captain Kirk to warn the detachments along the road, the party still at Megara and 4 Brigade Group at Kriekouki. Borrie, McDonald and those in the more forward sections of the scattered medical group were surrounded early that afternoon and taken to a collecting point about three miles east of the canal. Others not so far forward were able to return to Megara, where efforts were now being made to avoid capture.

After the walking party had moved off that morning the medical group under Captain Slater and the embarkation staff, under Lieutenant-Colonel R. Marnham, had been preparing to follow it up. But the news of the parachute landings brought in by Kirk and also by Lieutenant **Baxter**² of the walking party had forced a change in their plans. The embarkation staff hired a caique and proposed to sail that night for **Crete**.

In the meantime Marnham and Captain Baker took possession of a truck, drove north and reached Headquarters 4 Brigade about 2 p.m. After describing the situation, so far as they knew it, they were sent back by Brigadier Puttick to investigate still further, to collect all the troops about **Megara** and to be prepared to join the 4 Brigade column when it passed through the area.

At **Megara** there were actually several groups: the embarkation staff, Captain Ritchie with men from the Reinforcement Camp, men from the Mobile Dental Section, medical officers and men from 1 General Hospital and an unknown number of walking wounded. It was decided that some from each group should embark for **Crete** in the caique; the others would row to Salamis Island and await a vessel which would be sent over from **Crete**. However, during

¹ Capt H. C. Neale; **Levin**; born **Nelson**, 20 Aug 1914; medical practitioner; medical officer 4 Fd Amb Sep 1939–Apr 1941; p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

² Capt **B. Y. W. Baxter**; **Lower Hutt**; born **Timaru**, 15 Mar 1907; wool clerk; wounded 20 May 1941.

the afternoon Captains Slater and Neale and Lieutenant Foreman decided that it would be wiser to attempt to join 4 Brigade. They set out in salvaged vehicles with some forty walking wounded and orderlies from 1 General Hospital, but three miles east of **Megara** they were captured by some stray parachutists and taken back over the cliff road to the canal

area. Just how these lone parachutists came to be so far east of the **Corinth Canal** has never been explained.

Those who remained to leave by sea were more fortunate. Because of a report that parachutists had landed near the beach, the caique sailed before dark and after five days sailing from island to island reached **Crete**. Lieutenants Porter and Baxter were on board as well as Captain Kirk, who had preferred the risks of a run across open country to the beach to the indefinite chances of an escape that night.

Another group, Lieutenants C. A. Morton and **Foot**¹ with 19 other ranks, had started off for **Athens** in a truck, but warnings about the parachute troops had brought them back to the coast, where they took over a caique and spent the night attempting to sail for **Crete**. The craft had to be beached next morning so the party broke up. But when a Greek reported that there would be an evacuation that night from **Rafina**, Morton, Foot and three others commandeered a bus and hastened to **Athens**. There they hired a taxi to **Rafina** and left on the night of 27–28 April.

At the same time Lieutenant-Colonel Marnham and Captain Baker had been attempting to carry out the task allotted to them by 4 Brigade Headquarters. On their way back to **Megara** they had, however, been captured by the paratroopers, who disarmed them but left them in their lorry while other prisoners were being sent back to **Corinth**. The Germans had then begun to select another load, but the resourceful Marnham, seizing his opportunity, had driven off round the corner and into the olive groves. Once clear they had made their way separately to 4 Brigade Headquarters, Marnham in the truck risking a drive through **Megara** and Baker moving round the coast. The Morton-Foot party was there inspecting a caique, but Baker was taken by some Greeks in an already overloaded vehicle to the **Elevisis** junction where Brigadier Puttick was now established. Marnham and Baker had then volunteered to return with four Bren carriers as a fighting patrol along the road through **Megara**. The Germans had withdrawn but there were several groups of New Zealanders in the area, among them Captain Ritchie with

his party of about twelve men, and two men from B Company 19 Battalion who had come back from the canal area. They were picked up and the overloaded carriers were driven back to **Elevisis**, the

¹ **Lt S. E. Foot**; born **Auckland**, 31 Aug 1915; bank clerk; killed in action 25 May 1941.

additional personnel being taken on to **Porto Rafti** and the normal crews remaining with the rearguard.

Other groups of which no record exists escaped, ¹ but the great majority of the men left about **Megara Beach** or along the highway were prisoners for the rest of the war. The medical officers, Slater, Foreman, Borrie and Neale, were taken to **Corinth** the following day, 27 April, by **Dr Bauer** of the parachute force. There through the efforts of the Greek Red Cross personnel, Miss Ariadne Massautti ² in particular, they established a hospital in the Ionian Palace Hotel. Shortly afterwards the dental group—Lieutenants Warren, ³ **Noakes**, ⁴ **Dodgshun** ⁵ and **Spencer** ⁶—were brought in as additional medical personnel. Food and equipment were obtained from the Greek Red Cross; Sergeant E. O. Jones ⁷ of 1 General Hospital appeared with twenty men from the prisoner-of-war camp in the Greek barracks; Private **Savery** ⁸ of the same unit was the sole attendant or self-appointed doctor for another twenty in the Grande Bretagne Hotel. In all 122 patients of many nationalities went through these hospitals before 10 May, when they were closed, the remaining patients and staff being taken to 2/5 Australian General Hospital at **Kokkinia**, a suburb of **Athens**. Thereafter their story is one of movement to **Salonika** and eventually to the prisoner-of-war camps in **Germany**.

¹ Two officers and 18 men, including Driver J. B. Morice of 1 Ammunition Company and Private W. T. Phillips of the Field Security Section, left in a motor boat with no rudder and a useless diesel engine. They were blown to Skaramanga, where the party broke up, Morice and Phillips taking to the hills and reaching **Athens**. With Greek assistance they remained until

October, when they were assisted to escape to Turkey.

² She was later awarded the George Medal.

³ Capt J. Le B. Warren; Dunedin; born Auckland, 15 Mar 1916; dentist; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

⁴ Capt P. Noakes; Auckland; born Waihi, 20 Jun 1914; dentist; p.w. 27 Apr 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.

⁵ Capt J. T. Dodgshun, MBE; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 26 Apr 1915; dental surgeon; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

⁶ Capt R. D. Spencer; Wanganui; born Palmerston North, 25 Sep 1914; dentist; p.w Apr 1941.

⁷ WO II E. O. Jones; born NZ 16 Mar 1916; clerk; p.w. Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

⁸ Pte W. C. T. Savery; born Kent, England, 7 Jan 1900; waterside worker; p.w. 28 Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943; died 4 May 1956.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 19 – THE CORINTH CANAL

CHAPTER 19

The Corinth Canal

Preparations for Defence

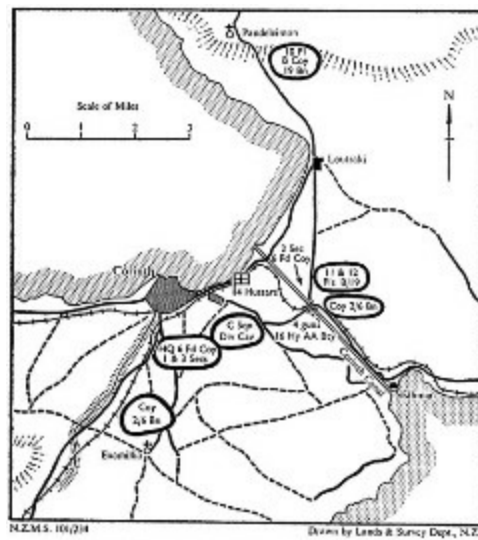
TO defend the **Corinth Canal** area, and more particularly the bridge, a miscellaneous collection of units had been assembled, haphazardly and with no unity of command. In the earlier stages of the campaign eight 3·7-inch anti-aircraft guns, eight 3-inch and sixteen Bofors guns had moved into position. Some of the last named were in the immediate vicinity of the canal; others were to the south along the road to **Argos**. On 23 April, when it was feared that the enemy advancing from Ioannina would reach the Gulf of **Corinth**, the Greeks had sent a small force to Navpaktos and their Reserve Officers Battalion to Patrai. Having similar worries, General Wilson had sent **4 Hussars** to protect the south bank of the canal and patrol the nearby shores of the gulf. With only twelve tanks, six carriers and one armoured car, the regiment, most of whose personnel were now riflemen, was responsible for a front of 70 miles. Consequently only four tanks were in the immediate vicinity of **Corinth**.

That night, at the request of Brigadier Steel (CRE **Anzac Corps**), **6 Field Company** which had been working with the Australians about **Thebes** was sent to the coast some three miles east of **Megara** and from there had to maintain the highway to and across the canal bridge. As explained to Captain Kelsall by Brigadier Puttick, 'it was his route out ... it was badly straffed by dive bombers, and blocked ... by refugees, carts and donkeys going to the **Peloponnese**.' Kelsall had to maintain the highway, prepare the bridge for demolition, repair it if it was bombed and, if that was not possible, to see that **4 Brigade** could cross by a pontoon bridge. So next morning, 24 April, **No. 2 Section** (Lieutenant **Wheeler**¹) was sent to prepare the bridge for demolition. The girders were strapped with gun-cotton and extra explosives placed under the abutments; TNT or gelignite was placed in the centre and wired to safety fuses at the south end. 'It was the first bridge of that type

¹ Lt C. M. Wheeler; Singapore; born NZ 28 Dec 1914; civil engineer; wounded 25 Jun 1942.

which we had seen so we made certain of the job, having plenty of explosive. The general plan was to blow it so that it would drop and block the Canal.’ ¹

The same day, as a result of the absence of air cover, a revised embarkation programme ² was drawn up at Headquarters **W Force**. Less use would be made of the beaches in **Attica** and more use of destroyers and the southern port of **Kalamata**. As the retention of the canal and the defence of the **Peloponnese** were then vitally important, Headquarters **W Force** sent Colonels J. S. Blunt and C. D. Quilliam to study the situation. They reported that Patrai was ‘normal and quiet’ but that the Greek commanders at both **Corinth** and **Tripolis**, though friendly, wanted authority from



CORINTH CANAL POSITIONS, 26 APRIL 1941
CORINTH CANAL POSITIONS, 26 APRIL 1941

¹ Sapper L. D. Mumford, 6 Field Company.

² See pp. 400– 1.

Athens for any future action. Brigadier Lee was appointed area commander of the **Peloponnese** with definite instructions to be prepared for landings on the airfields, and **Isthmus Force** was formed to defend the canal area.

The Brigadier hastened to the canal area. That night (24–25 April) when **Allen Group** was crossing the bridge he asked the Australians for a battalion ‘to help guard the area against possible attack by German armour from the north or against paratroops.’¹ Three companies and two platoons from 2/6 Battalion were then detached, one being placed on the north side of the bridge, another with the two platoons going to the airfields near **Argos** and the third to the **Corinth** area to join **4 Hussars**.

On the same night Major Rattray had brought up to Brigadier Puttick from Headquarters **W Force**, now in **Athens**, the instructions about **Isthmus Force**. It would consist of a company of infantry, 6 Field Company already in the area, one section of 122 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery and one troop of **7 Armoured Division** Field Squadron, **Royal Engineers**.² If 4 Brigade, as was then planned, was evacuated from **Megara** on the night of 26–27 April, the force would blow both the road and the bridge and then hasten to embark from **Navplion**. Should the **Navy** fail to appear the brigade would withdraw across the canal, the force then coming under the command of Brigadier Puttick.

At 4 a.m. on 25 April Major R. K. Gordon was ordered to take B Company 19 Battalion to the canal area. There he would command **Isthmus Force**, carrying out the orders from **W Force** and an instruction from Brigadier Puttick that the road from the north-west through Loutraki must be held in strength. Leaving Lieutenant **Heiford**³ to take the company to a defensive position north of that village, Gordon went ahead to the canal area, where he expected to meet representatives from the other units of Isthmus Force. Apparently their orders did not arrive until the afternoon for no one appeared at the meeting place. However, the anti-aircraft guns were in position; the engineers were completing

their work about the bridge; and, to his surprise, Gordon found the company of Australian infantry on the north side of the canal in defence of the bridge and under the command of Colonel E. G. G. Lillingston of **4 Hussars**.

In his instructions Gordon had not been told about this defence system being arranged by **Lee Force**, nor had **Lee Force** any

¹ Long, p. 161.

² C Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and the carrier platoons of 22 and 28 (Maori) Battalions were added later.

³ **Capt H. R. Heiford**, ED; **Auckland**; born **Napier**, 10 Sep 1906; factory manager; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

information about the New Zealand company. It was therefore doubtful who was to be in command of the canal area; Gordon had his orders but Lillingston was the senior officer. To clear up the confusion Gordon visited Headquarters **Lee Force** at **Argos**, but he got no satisfaction and decided not to hand over his force until ordered to do so by Headquarters **W Force**. Much time was wasted discussing who would give the orders for **4 Hussars** to withdraw and it was evening before Gordon, still without definite instructions, was back across the canal checking the position of his company at Loutraki.

The platoons were on high ground about three miles north of the village and Gordon was satisfied with their positions until he was on his way back to establish headquarters near the canal. The country on either side of it was so suitable for parachute landings that he returned to his company and, in spite of the late hour, transferred two platoons to an area some 700–800 yards north of the canal.

That night, 25–26 April, several other units entered the canal area. The Australian company which had been detached to join **4 Hussars** had

finally been ordered by **General Freyberg** to clear a detour through the bomb-damaged streets of **Corinth**. That task complete, it had been sent to defend the ridge overlooking the road to the south of the canal.

Sixth Field Company, whose bivouac area east of **Megara** had become untenable because of strafing, moved across the canal to an area about two miles south of **Corinth**. Major Rudd, who had been acting CRE, rejoined Headquarters, which was in an olive grove with No. 1 Section (Lieutenant J. O. Wells); farther along the road was No. 3 Section (Lieutenant St. G. W. Chapman).

Finally, about 2.30 a.m. on 26 April, C Squadron New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment (Major **Harford**¹) came through from the **Mazi** area with the carrier platoons of 22 and 28 (Maori) Battalions. The journey had been delayed by petrol shortages and engine trouble and the 22 Battalion carriers, by missing the turn-off, had gone south of **Corinth** and out of the area in which the paratroops were soon to land. The cavalrymen and the Maoris, however, had halted in the olive groves on the terraces between **Corinth** and the canal bridge. Once it was daylight Harford proposed to carry out the orders given to him at Divisional Headquarters at **Mazi**: to report to the 'OC **Isthmus Force**' and, on the withdrawal of 4 Brigade across the canal, to move his detachment westwards to **Patrai** and then southwards to **Kalamata**.

¹ Lt-Col **E. R. Harford**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Waitara; born **Nelson**, 8 Mar 1904; farm manager; 2 i/c Div Cav Regt Jan-Apr 1942.

The Germans Attack from the Air

Now, on 24 April Marshal List had decided that the narrowness of the front and the state of the roads made it necessary for General Stumme (**XXXX Corps**) to control the advance, with **XVIII Corps** under command. He had to break through to **Athens** and establish a bridgehead over the **Corinth Canal**.

To accomplish the latter objective it was decided to use the parachute troops which had originally been assembled to take the island of Lemnos. ¹ No battle report describing the capture of the canal area has been discovered but the plan had been prepared shortly after the breakthrough at **Rupel Pass**. Reinforced, *Parachute Regiment 2* (Colonel Sturm), using five groups of Ju52s and 2000–2500 troops, was to land and block the escape of British troops to either **Crete** or **Egypt**; gliders were to be used to land troops close to the bridge to prevent its being destroyed; and the units already concentrated about **Larisa** were to attack on the morning of 26 April.

The *Luftwaffe* had hitherto been content to bomb **Argos** and **Corinth** and strafe the highway between them, but about seven o'clock that morning the canal area was heavily and systematically dive-bombed and machine-gunned. The anti-aircraft gunners were magnificent, but before long many of them were wounded and all their guns wrecked. Then about 7.25 a.m. the Ju52s came over, flying low in groups of three to drop the many-coloured parachutes supporting the troopers and their supplies. At the same time gliders crash-landed near the bridge, the men from one near its south end rushing on to clear the demolitions. They were cutting the fuses when the charges exploded, killing them all and so wrecking the bridge that it dropped neatly into the canal.

The reason for the explosion is still a mystery. Sapper **Eastgate** ² at the north end and Sapper **Mumford** ³ on the open south bank, picketting the approaches to the bridge, had been surrounded and were unable to do anything. There was no anti-aircraft fire by that time and there was no artillery in the area, so it is hardly likely that a charge was hit by shell splinters.

But there are other possibilities. Two British officers—Lieutenant J. T. Tyson, **Royal Engineers**, who had assisted the New Zealand engineers to prepare the charges, and Captain J. P. Phillips of the **Devonshire Regiment**—had spent the night south of the bridge,

¹ The occupation of Lemnos had been part of the move of Lustre Force to **Greece** but 1 Battalion, The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, which had been landed on 4 April, had been evacuated on 12 April. With other islands, Lemnos was occupied on 23 April by units of *164 Division*, transported on a German steamer, Greek fishing craft and two Italian destroyers.

² **Spr F. T. Eastgate; Lower Hutt**; born NZ 15 Oct 1912; labourer; wounded 24 Jun 1942.

³ **Spr L. D. Mumford**; born NZ 19 Nov 1913; labourer; p.w. Apr 1941.

and when the Germans landed Tyson had suggested attempting to light the fuse. But it was 'not more than fifteen feet from the plane which had landed.'¹ They had therefore crawled to a shelter bank from which Phillips had fired at the charges strapped to the bridge. After his second shot the explosion² occurred. They then slipped away to the south-east, joining men from the anti-aircraft batteries and eventually crossing the hills to the **Navplion** embarkation area.

Such an explosion was possible, for early in the campaign curious engineers had placed some TNT in a bank and found that it could be exploded by rifle fire. But several who worked on the bridge think that the only explosive strapped in packets on the outside of the girders was wet gun-cotton, which could not be exploded by rifle fire.³ Others, however, state that there was some TNT on the deck of the bridge which could have been hit by rifle bullets. There is also a report that two sappers from 6 New Zealand Field Company south of the bridge made a dash and lit the fuse. 'Just short of the bridge one of the boys fell. The other made the bridge ... he seemed to fall but the next moment I saw he was coming back. He looked to have cleared the bridge when it seemed to heave....'⁴

The Germans, however, make no reference to any spectacular rush

to light the fuse; in fact one account states that British resistance had 'decreased almost to the vanishing point', and another that a war correspondent was actually standing on the bridge 'making a film for the weekly newsreel.' Moreover, their signals sent back during the action give three different explanations for the explosion. The first, which was despatched at 9.45 a.m., stated that the bridge was blown; others stated that it was blown by a remotely controlled or delayed charge; and finally at 11.20 a.m. Colonel Meister signalled, 'Bridge over canal not blown but destroyed by shellfire.'

Those who had been ordered to capture the bridge intact were very disappointed and exceedingly curious, and after the fighting was over any captured officer who might have some information was carefully cross-examined. Lieutenant Heiford was even asked if there had been a line from the bridge to his position over four miles away. The opinion of senior German officers after the war was that, 'The bridge itself was blown up, not however by blasting by the British according to plan but by a mere accident. The parachute officer commissioned to remove the explosive charges

¹ 'The Events at the [Corinth Canal](#), 26 April 1941': report by Captain J. P. Phillips, MC.

² Wilson, p. 98: 'The possibility of this method of setting off the charge has been disputed but on the advice of experts I gave the officers a M.C.'

³ 'I am very sorry that the story of the Sapper officer blowing up the bridge by firing at the charges is untrue, but it never seemed likely to me!!'—Latham to [Kippenberger](#) 14 Nov 1955.

⁴ H. E. Smith, 16 Jul 1947.

had piled up the already complete explosive charges owing to a misunderstanding. Coming from a long distance a chance hit of this pile

effected the detonation and thus the collapse of the bridge.’ ¹

The two platoons of B Company 19 Battalion in the shelter of the olive groves had not apparently been observed by the enemy, for Gordon had time to organise an attack in support of the Australians. But the small force was soon driven to ground and facing counter-attacks on both flanks. The bridge had been demolished by that time so Gordon decided that the platoons, already short of ammunition, must attempt to join 4 Brigade at **Megara**. ² Leaving the wounded with Second-Lieutenant **Ferguson**, ³ who was himself a casualty, Gordon withdrew but before long both he and Second-Lieutenant **Budd** ⁴ had been wounded. Warrant Officer **Jones** ⁵ then took command of the remnants, who got clear of the canal area and then attempted in small parties to find 4 Brigade. Some actually reached ⁶ **Megara** and from there joined 4 Brigade at **Porto Rafti**; the majority were captured; others, assisted by the Greeks, eventually reached Egypt.

The third platoon from B Company in the Loutraki area had seen the paratroopers come down but was too far away to take any part in the action. After midday Greeks warned Lieutenant Heiford that the enemy was in the village and at dusk the platoon hastened to the coast, capturing on the way a drunken paratroop officer who was using a captured motor-cycle. But by the time they had found two rowing boats it was too late to cross the Gulf of **Corinth**. They waited, hoping to get the use of a motor boat, but next day an English-speaking Greek appeared with the Greek police to say that the cave was surrounded by Germans. As there was no chance of escape the whole platoon had to surrender.

Units on the south bank had more chances to escape. The Australian company was outside the area in which the paratroops landed, but ‘before long paratroops supported by machine-gun fire were advancing towards its position.’ ⁷ The commander thereupon decided to move back towards **Argos**. On the way south the Australians were given transport by the companies of 26 Battalion which had been sent north to block the

¹ Supplement to the essay, 'The Balkan Campaign', by prisoners of war in Allendorf Camp, 1947.

² 4 Brigade embarked from **Porto Rafti**. For the change in plan see pp. 424– 5.

³ Capt C. A. L. Ferguson; **Gisborne**; born **Gisborne**, 2 Oct 1915; hardware salesman; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

⁴ Capt F. M. S. Budd; **Hastings**; born **Waihi**, 19 May 1913; factory supervisor; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

⁵ WO II J. M. C. Jones; **Okoia**, **Wanganui**; born **Wanganui**, 10 May 1916; farm labourer; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

⁶ See pp. 411– 12.

⁷ Long, p. 167.

enemy. Remaining in touch with 6 Brigade, the company eventually embarked with it from **Monemvasia**.

Headquarters **4 Hussars** was a total loss but by midnight the three squadrons (with patrols from GHQ Liaison Regiment under command) had withdrawn to **Patrai**. As a German landing was imminent, they moved south that afternoon towards **Tripolis** and **Kalamata**.

The advance parties from 4 Brigade were less fortunate. The brigade intelligence officer got away with two men, met A Company 26 Battalion and reported to **Divisional Headquarters**, ¹ but the supply officer with four men was afterwards reported 'so far missing.'

Sixth Field Company (less the section at the bridge and the two sub-

sections on the **Athens** road) in its more sheltered area had escaped the early strafing but its position was soon desperate. Major Rudd, who went forward towards the bridge, met survivors of No. 2 Section and with them withdrew towards **Argos**. Meanwhile Kelsall had organised the rest of the company and put up a stout defence, the Germans afterwards recording 'heavy casualties' in the area. But outnumbered, short of weapons and harassed by mortar fire, the company withdrew that afternoon in small groups. Lieutenant Chapman ² and his section got clear. Lieutenant Wells and his group, after going through the outskirts of **Corinth** and reaching the south road, were taken by a Greek to an air-raid shelter where they planned to stay until nightfall. But a Greek officer appeared with some paratroopers and the party was captured and taken to the prisoner-of-war cage at the cemetery.

Kelsall and some fifteen other ranks crawled through the low vines, came unexpectedly upon a farmhouse occupied by Germans and then scattered. Kelsall and another sapper escaped, joined two Australians and two English soldiers from the anti-aircraft batteries and with them went over the hills hoping to reach **Navplion**. Informed by Greeks that embarkation from that port had ceased, they turned south-east through wild, romantic country and eventually reached the coast, from which on 29 April they were ferried across the bay to Spetsai Island. Here two officers and 40 other ranks of **4 Hussars** appeared with some Australians. The combined parties hired a caique and sailed to Velopoula, where they picked up a sub-lieutenant from **Piræus**, whose boat had been shot up off the island. That night, 1-2 May, the party weathered a severe storm and reached Milos with a disabled ship. While they were attempting to obtain another more escapees arrived and other ships ³ called on their way to **Crete**. Finally on 8 May, after a Cretan colonel had

¹ See p. 424.

² Chapman arrived in **Crete** with two officers and sixteen men on 11 May.

forced the Greeks to produce a ship, the party prepared to sail—in all 320, including 180 Cretans from the Albanian front. But next evening as the ship was about to leave Milos, three German motor boats appeared and the odyssey came to an end. ¹

Other men of 6 Field Company were more fortunate. Sapper **Carson**, ² after being wounded and cared for in hospitals at **Corinth** and **Piræus**, escaped with Lance-Bombardier **Marshall** ³ of 7 Anti- Tank Regiment and reached Euboea. From there they sailed to Skiros and were taken by Greek fishermen to **Turkey**, reaching Egypt in September 1941. Sapper **Stuart** ⁴ escaped into the hills to join two other sappers and two Australians. The peasants were hospitable— ‘we were kissed, wept over, given bread, cheese and wine and provided with a guide in the space of half-an-hour.’ They eventually reached an island and became members of a party of sixty-four New Zealanders, Englishmen and Australians who were eventually taken by Greeks to **Turkey**.

The only other New Zealand units in the **Corinth** area were C Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and the carrier platoon from 28 (Maori) Battalion. The landing began while the men were still digging in and before Major Harford could find the ‘OC Isthmus Force’, but the units put up a solid resistance, WO II Seccombe ⁵ being very effective with his Vickers. But it was soon obvious that the group would be overwhelmed, so with the intention of withdrawing and then reorganising, orders were given by wireless and by runner for the units to withdraw along a track which seemed, according to the map, to rejoin the main road south of **Corinth**. The crews from three or four **Divisional Cavalry** and four or five Maori carriers did not get clear by this route; some were casualties, some prisoners, and others the fortunate crews of carriers which reached the highway. The main party—two armoured cars and five carriers of C Squadron (about thirty men) and two carriers from 28 (Maori) Battalion (about ten men)—got clear, but the track petered out and the carriers were eventually run into a deep gully. The crews,

guided by Greeks and very exhausted, then hurried over the hills towards **Navplion**, hoping that they would be in time for the embarkation ⁶ which was to take place that night.

The Germans were not able to interfere with this operation nor had they captured the bridge intact, but they had split the British

¹ German reports state that '19 Officers and 105 English OR' were captured.

² **Spr S. E. Carson**, m.i.d.; **Lyttelton**; born **Lyttelton**, 9 Dec 1914; plumber; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941; escaped Jul 1941; safe in Egypt Sep 1941.

³ **Bdr F. S. Marshall**; born NZ 3 Nov 1914; insurance agent; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped Jul 1941; safe in Egypt Sep 1941; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

⁴ **Spr J. B. Stuart**; **Te Awamutu**; born **Auckland**, 28 Nov 1910; farmer.

⁵ **Capt G. T. Seccombe**, DCM, m.i.d.; Upper Hutt; born **Whangarei**, 27 Oct 1915; Regular soldier; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶ See p. 429.

forces in **Greece**. South of the canal were the units to be evacuated from **Navplion**, **Monemvasia** and **Kalamata**. To the north artillery regiments were already assembling to embark from the **Marathon** beaches, but the rearguard—4 Brigade and units from 1 Armoured Brigade—was still in position south of **Thebes**. Their successful evacuation now depended upon the receipt of wireless messages ¹ from **General Freyberg**, upon the flexibility of the overall plan, and upon the efficiency of the **Navy**.

Thus it was natural that in all German reports the action was described as yet another triumph. At the cost of only one or two aircraft, 63 killed, 158 wounded and 16 missing, they had captured the canal area; the Allied casualties were not stated but the Germans claimed to have 921 British and 1450 Greek prisoners of war. Later they argued that the attack had been excellent training for the airborne troops who were soon to make the landing on **Crete**.

More important, however, was the Germans' failure to appreciate the strength of the force now isolated on the ridges south of **Thebes**. Had they realised that it was 4 Brigade Group and not just a small rearguard they would undoubtedly have made greater efforts to prevent its eventual evacuation. ²

¹ See pp. 424– 5.

² See pp. 437– 41.

Action is taken to prevent the Parachute Troops moving South

The security of 4 Brigade and the successful embarkation that night of the units assembled about **Navplion** were the major problems for **General Freyberg**, who was now at **Miloi**, a fishing port and the headquarters of both **W Force** and New Zealand Division. The first warnings which were received about 9 a.m. suggested that only a hundred paratroopers had landed. But when Lieutenant-Colonel Lillingston of **4 Hussars**, who was also present, stated that he had only thirty men in the area, **Freyberg** gave verbal orders to Brigadier Barrowclough for 6 Brigade to give some support. Lieutenant-Colonel Page of 26 Battalion was thereupon instructed to prevent the parachute force blocking the withdrawal that night of 4 Brigade across the canal. Two rifle companies and the carrier platoon would assist troops in the area; the rest of the battalion would remain in reserve some three or four miles north of **Argos**. The move was urgent and 'relatively high density'

on the highway had to be risked; 'the utmost speed was essential.'³

Soon afterwards the first stragglers came through from **Corinth** with exaggerated accounts of the attack and the suggestion that the Germans were already striking south towards **Argos** and **Navplion**.

³ 6 Brigade to Lt-Col Page, 26 April.

Later there was a telephone message from a detachment of 4 Hussars west of **Corinth** stating that the Germans were crossing in small boats in the vicinity of Patrai. The General consequently made every effort to cover the embarkation which was to take place that night from **Navplion**. In the **Argos** area Brigadier Lee was put in charge of one and a half companies of 2/6 Australian Battalion, the troops from 2 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery, remnants of 3 Royal Tank Regiment who had been Force Headquarters guard, two 'Bofors A Tk guns' and about two platoons of stragglers. There they would remain until nightfall, when they would move south to prepare a defensive position outside **Monemvasia**. In the **Miloi** area 25 Battalion remained in reserve. The original task for 6 Brigade, the holding of the road junction at **Tripolis**, was therefore delegated to 24 Battalion, which moved south soon after midday.

A and D Companies 26 Battalion had already moved off to assist the troops in the canal area 'to retain possession of the bridge'.¹ The sky was clear and enemy aircraft were about, but the orders were to push forward, stopping only if there were direct attacks. D Company was halted by punctures and minor damage due to machine-gunning but A Company (Captain **Milliken**²) carried on, one lorry eventually being hit before the troops could take cover. The majority of those on board were wounded and the vehicle was soon blazing fiercely, but in spite of more machine-gunning at least twelve men were saved by Privates **Struthers**,³ **Morrison**⁴ and **Delaney**,⁵ who dragged them into a nearby culvert.

The troops were eventually forced by enemy aircraft to take cover

just north of Golomos, a village five miles south of **Corinth**. Shortly afterwards in the narrow gorge ahead of them they saw the helmets of a German advance party. The enemy were neatly rounded up and ten Allied soldiers set free. Lieutenant-Colonel Page arrived shortly afterwards, D Company followed and the two companies deployed along the ridge on either side of the gorge. As they were doing so a lorry with 28 (Maori) Battalion markings appeared. The German driver was killed and the German recognition flag confiscated. The companies then completed their move to the crest of the ridge, from which they engaged the approaching paratroopers. Shortly afterwards the air attacks were renewed, it was difficult to move forward, and there seemed little chance of the companies ever reaching **Corinth**.

¹ 6 Brigade to Lt-Col Page, 26 April.

² **Maj T. Milliken**, m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1896; solicitor; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

³ **Pte H. E. Struthers**, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 19 Oct 1917; musterer; twice wounded; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

⁴ **L-Cpl A. R. Morrison**, MM, m.i.d.; **Timaru**; born **Gisborne**, 12 Aug 1916; shop assistant; wounded and p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

⁵ **Sgt F. O. Delaney**, m.i.d.; **Blenheim**; born **Nelson**, 29 Aug 1917; farmer; wounded Nov 1942.

The problem was solved for them by the appearance of Lieutenant **Beale**, ¹ Intelligence Officer 4 Brigade, from the direction of **Corinth**. As he reported that the bridge had been blown that morning, there was no need for the companies to remain in their isolated position. Orders had therefore been issued for the move back to the vehicles, but Major J. I. Brooke, from Headquarters 6 Brigade, appeared with fresh instructions: **General Freyberg**, now that more information had been received, did not

think that the two companies were strong enough for the task assigned to them so they were to withdraw and cover the approach to **Navplion** from the high ground north of **Argos**.

After further delays due to air attacks and damaged transport the companies moved south, assisting wherever possible the British and Australian stragglers ²—some one to two hundred—who were trudging back on foot. When in position astride the road near the village of Nemea, they remained until midnight. In all there had been twenty-one casualties, including four killed and two who later died of wounds.

The rest of the battalion had moved forward during the afternoon to Ano Fikhtia, a village about 20 miles north of **Miloi**, where they had settled in with orders to remain until midnight covering the approaches to **Navplion**; after that they would withdraw, even if the forward companies had not yet come through.

¹ **Maj J. H. Beale**, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born England, 3 Apr 1912; salesman.

² See pp. 419–20.

New Plans and Further Withdrawals, 26 April

The day had also been very tense and exciting for the Divisional Headquarters staff at **Miloi**. Once the news had been received of the probable capture of the canal area fresh plans had been hastily prepared, particularly for the 4 Brigade Group in the **Kriekouki** area whose position was even more perilous than that of 6 Brigade in the **Peloponnese**. Using the **Middle East** and naval wireless links, **General Freyberg** had attempted to warn Brigadier Puttick but for several hours there was no response to any signals. Efforts were therefore made to get in touch with Brigadier Charrington of 1 Armoured Brigade, who was known to have a No. 9 wireless set at his headquarters north of **Rafina**. As all codes had been destroyed the message was sent in clear:

Operation Priority. Send LO and tell Puttick that **Corinth Canal** has been captured by German parachute troops. Instead of withdrawing as ordered he is to move and withdraw from the beaches Hargest used. From N.Z. Division.

To the intense relief of **General Freyberg** a message came back from 1 Armoured Brigade asking for the date of evacuation. This was, as yet, undecided but the reply was that shipping would probably be available that night or the next.

Wilson and **Freyberg** had also arranged for the evacuations south of the canal. From **Monemvasia** the Navy would take off 6 New Zealand Brigade and all troops not directed to **Kalamata**. At the same time it was decided that Wilson and **W Force** Headquarters should be responsible for the evacuation of non-fighting troops.¹ This left **Freyberg** responsible for **Lee Force** in the **Argos** area, for **4 Hussars** now hastening south from Patrai and for 6 Brigade assembling about **Tripolis**. No reference was made to the troops assembling still farther south at **Kalamata**; in fact the only reference to them by **General Freyberg** is his statement that he had not been informed of the large group to be evacuated from that port.

The withdrawal of **4 Hussars** was the most difficult to direct. In the morning when news was received of the parachute landings, Colonel Lillingston at **Divisional Headquarters** had asked **Freyberg** to extricate his three squadrons from the Patrai area. One of their officers was immediately sent to get in touch with them and towards evening two others, with petrol and Greek money, were sent with orders for the squadron to withdraw through **Tripolis**. To prevent any diversion Greek guides had been stationed along the route to direct the approaching columns. The advanced guard joined 6 Brigade at **Tripolis**, linked up with the survivors from the **Corinth** area and with them was evacuated with 6 Brigade from **Monemvasia**. But the main body—some 300 strong—seems to have mistrusted the Greeks for it continued south to become involved in the disaster at **Kalamata**.

Other units were more fortunate. After suffering some casualties

from air attacks 24 Battalion had moved south that afternoon, 26 April, to the **Tripolis** area. Beyond **Miloi** there was the endless series of hairpin bends to the crest of the Ktenas Range, a wild and rugged country looking more charming than it really is because of its softness of tone and harmony of colours. Thence the road swung down to **Tripolis** at the crossroads of the **Peloponnese**. To the west dark hills overlooked the town, but elsewhere there were fertile fields of corn, grapes and tobacco, groves of oak trees and avenues of cypress trees.

There had been more strafing en route but the widely dispersed trucks and efficient lookouts had prevented any serious damage. The only mishap was the loss of one and a half platoons from A Company and one platoon and a small group from B Company. The military police outside the town had been instructed to divert all 24 Battalion transport into **Tripolis**, but these platoons had been left to continue along the road to **Kalamata** with the reinforcement troops, the Palestinian labour units and the Australian detachments hurrying to join their units. The depleted battalion had meanwhile taken control of the roads leading into Patrai, C Company that from **Kalamata** and D Company the highway along which it travelled from **Miloi**.

At nightfall, 26–27 April, the main withdrawal began, **General Freyberg** and his staff leaving **Miloi** to set up headquarters some ten miles south of **Tripolis** and **Lee Force** moving from the **Argos** area through **Tripolis** to **Sparta** and the approaches to **Monemvasia**.

Headquarters 6 Brigade followed about midnight to the high country east of **Tripolis**; with it were the detachments from 22 and 23 Battalions which had, as **Hart Force**, masked the approaches to the **Thermopylae** line. About the same time 26 Battalion pulled out from Ano Fikhtia, leaving a small party to link up with A and D Companies when they came through from their rearguard position north of **Argos**. Next morning the battalion was off the road and under cover east of **Tripolis**. Twenty-fifth Battalion had followed up to a position astride the road at **Akhladhokambos**, a village in the hills to the north of **Tripolis**. The three battalions now controlled the approaches to the town and there they

were to remain until after dark on the night of 27–28 April, when they would withdraw to **Monemvasia** for embarkation the following night.

¹ The source of this statement is the Division's 'G' Branch war diary; it probably refers to the troops to be evacuated that night from **Navplion**, many of them being Base Details.

Evacuations Continue during the Night 26-27 April

The night was also notable for the number of successful embarkations. At **Miloi** the Force Headquarters group had assembled on the quay, confident about a caique which one of the staff had chartered but doubtful about the destroyers and the flying boat whose despatch had not been confirmed by the authorities in **Crete**. The flying boat was there but no destroyer. After waiting until midnight Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman, who wished to take his staff and beachmasters to **Monemvasia**, left in the caique, but shortly afterwards the *Havock* arrived and in her the party hastened down the coast, enemy air superiority making it essential to reach the port before daylight. Outside the port they unexpectedly came upon the ten LCAs ¹ sent on from the bombed

¹ See p. 428.

Glenearn. The party landed in them and waited in a small bay four miles north of **Monemvasia**; the LCAs were scattered along the beaches about half a mile apart.

At **Miloi** itself the patience of the flying-boat group—General Wilson, **Prince Peter of Greece** and certain Greek Ministers, Major-General T. G. G. Heywood and some members of the British Military Mission—had been severely tested. As the pilot explained, he could not risk a landing in **Suda Bay** until 6.30 a.m. and he could not make an immediate departure because he had not the petrol to remain in the air all that night.

Consequently they had to wait. The hours passed by; the 6 Brigade rearguard passed through to **Tripolis**. Since there was then no force between the flying boat and the advancing enemy, the pilot taxied off down the coast in an unpleasantly choppy sea until at last he was able to take off for **Crete**.

On the coast east of **Athens** the rearguard position about Tatoi had been maintained during the day by **1 Rangers**, A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment, N Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery and L/N Battery **2 Royal Horse Artillery**; in the evening C Company **1 Rangers** and N Troop 34 Anti-Tank Battery had covered the withdrawal to the beaches at **Rafina**. Assembled there when the *Glengyle* arrived off shore with the destroyers *Nubian*, *Decoy* and *Hasty* were 6 Field Regiment, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 2 Royal Horse Artillery, 102 Anti-Tank Regiment, 155 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment (less C Squadron), 1 Armoured Brigade and many odd detachments from the **Athens** area, such as the group of New Zealand reinforcements who had been guarding the Hassani airfield. Uncertain about their orders to move with the Reinforcement Battalion to **Navplion**, the men had collected some thirty stragglers of all nationalities in **Athens** and then followed their original orders to move to **Rafina**.

Owing to the heavy swell the *Glengyle* had to remain a mile and a half out to sea; this meant that if the convoy was to sail at 3 a.m. the last boat had to leave the beach by 2.15 a.m. The result was that, although men ¹ were taken to the destroyers as well as to the *Glengyle*, several hundred were still on the beach when the convoy departed.

There were 800 of 1 Armoured Brigade, 250 of **1 Rangers**, 117 of 102 Anti-Tank Regiment and many New Zealanders from 34 Anti-Tank Battery, 4 Machine Gun Company and A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment. On the orders of Brigadier Charrington the groups moved to the low ridge on the southern edge of the beach. There in the shelter of the laurels, myrtles and

¹ 3503 all ranks—according to naval reports.

scattered olive trees they took cover and hoped for the return of the **Navy** the following night.

At **Porto Rafti** ¹ there had been the troopship *Salween*, the cruiser *Carlisle* and the destroyers *Kandahar* and *Kingston*. Most of Advanced Headquarters New Zealand Artillery, 4 Field Regiment, 5 Field Regiment and 64 Medium Regiment (less Headquarters 234 Battery and D Troop) went aboard the *Salween*. Sections from the last named and from 5 Field Park Company and 7 Field Company were also taken by the troopship; the remainder left in the escort vessels. Headquarters 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, with 2 Company complete and 1 Company, less 1 and 3 Platoons with 4 Brigade, had come south with **Duff Force**. Second-Lieutenant **Luxford** ² and a small group were now manning the road blocks until 4 Brigade reached the area but the others went aboard the *Salween*, complete with Vickers guns less tripods. To their surprise 3 Company was already aboard, having come south with 6 Brigade and been directed ³ from **Mazi** to **Porto Rafti** for embarkation.

The night was also notable for the reappearance of the 500 men ⁴ who had been taken to **Kea Island** on the night of 24–25 April. To their great relief a naval officer had appeared about noon on 26 April to say that the tank landing craft would be leaving the other side of the island at 8 p.m. The men had been hurriedly called together and in groups of twenty despatched across the mountains. Once the majority had arrived the landing craft had hastened to **Porto Rafti**. The heavy ground swell prevented all but a few getting aboard the *Salween*, but the others eventually got aboard the *Carlisle*. In the meantime the destroyer *Nubian* had called at the island only to find that the men had already been collected. Three fortunate men from the Supply Column who had missed the LCT were then evacuated.

The convoy sailed at 3 a.m., 27 April; the destination of the troops

was to be decided later that night.

In the **Peloponnese**, units embarked from **Navplion**, **Tolos** and the southern port of **Kalamata**. According to the original plan, the landing ship *Glenearn* was to have gone to **Navplion** but she was bombed and disabled; her invaluable landing craft had to be disembarked and sent to **Monemvasia**.⁵ Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell thereupon sent the destroyer *Stuart* to assist the ships already at **Tolos** and took the cruisers *Orion* and *Perth* to **Navplion**, where the

¹ 4720 all ranks—according to naval reports.

² Lt M. B. Luxford; Hastings; born **Wanganui**, 14 Mar 1913; grocer.

³ See pp. 407– 8.

⁴ See p. 403.

⁵ They were practically the only means of embarkation from **Monemvasia** for 6 NZ Brigade on the night of 28–29 April. See pp. 426– 7, 446.

cruiser *Calcutta*, the troopships *Slamat* and *Khedive Ismail* and four destroyers were already anchored.

At **Navplion** the hulk of the *Ulster Prince* made it impossible for the destroyers to get alongside the quays and the choppy sea made it dangerous to use small boats; in fact one report has it that 100 men were drowned. And there was only one motor caique transporting men to the *Slamat*, so although the **Navy** did what it could with its own boats the *Khedive Ismail* embarked no troops at all.

To complicate matters word was received during the embarkation that the *Stuart* at **Tolos** was full and that many troops still remained

ashore. The *Stuart* was thereupon brought back to *Navplion*, her troops were transferred to the *Orion*, and with the *Perth* she was sent back to continue the embarkation. The naval records state that 1559 were taken off from *Tolos*; another source ¹ states that about 2000 embarked and that some 1300 were left on the beach.

The cruisers, destroyers and the troopship *Slamat* took away from *Navplion* a possible 2968 men; another source states that they sailed with 2600 men, leaving 1700 ashore, ² including 700 from the Australian Reinforcement Battalion.

The LCT which had been operating at *Navplion* departed next morning for *Monemvasia* ³ with 600 Australians, but the evacuation was still incomplete. According to the naval sources approximately 5500 men, and not the 8000 as planned, had been evacuated from the area (*Navplion* and *Tolos*).

The troops evacuated had been for the most part from Base and *W Force* Headquarters, but there had also been fighting units such as 3 Royal Tank Regiment, less C Squadron, ⁴ and small detachments of New Zealand troops, including some medical orderlies from 1 General Hospital ⁵ and the remainder of E Section (Workshops) 4 RMT Company. ⁶ There were also those wounded from *Megara* who had been fortunate enough to be south of the *Corinth Canal* before the parachutists landed. Less fortunate were the men from C Squadron *Divisional Cavalry* Regiment who had managed to cross the hills from the *Corinth Canal* area. Sent to the tail of a long column 'with a half promise that there might be some room in a ship', they had almost reached the water's edge when embarkation stopped and they were once again left to their own resources.

At *Kalamata* there had been less trouble getting aboard ship but more men left on the beaches. Instead of some 8000 men collecting

¹ Long, p. 170.

² Ibid., p. 171.

³ See p. 444.

⁴ See p. 451.

⁵ See p. 404.

⁶ See p. 405.

in the area for embarkation there had been about 15,000. The first to get away were 16–17 Australian Brigade Group and some base details, in all about 8650 men in the troopships *Dilwarra*, *City of London* and *Costa Rica* and their screen of five destroyers. But left patiently waiting on the beach were still 7000 men, including the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion. ¹

Next morning all three convoys were still within range of German aircraft. The ships from *Kalamata* and those from *Rafina* and Porto Rafti were attacked on several occasions but no great damage was done. The convoy from *Navplion* and *Tolos* was less fortunate. By leaving the former port at 4.15 a.m., although ordered to do so at 3 a.m., the *Slamat* was exposed to too great a risk. At 7 a.m. bombers came over; the transport was hit and began to sink. The destroyer *Diamond* was sent to her aid and about 9 a.m., when three more destroyers joined the convoy, the *Wryneck* was sent to help with the rescue work. Most of the survivors had been picked up but at 10.25 a.m. the *Wryneck* signalled for fighter protection. Then all was blank until a destroyer that night picked up some survivors. From the two destroyers and the *Slamat*, on which there were some 500 soldiers, only 1 officer, 41 ratings and 8 soldiers survived. Among those drowned were the New Zealand medical officers Captains *Douglas* ² and *Newlands*. ³ They had been members of a group of 12 medical officers and 24 orderlies who had been sent aboard

the transports by the **Middle East** command, which wished for the best and earliest care to be given to the evacuated troops. Of the eight New Zealanders in the *Slamat* only one was saved: Private **Kellec**,⁴ who was taken aboard one of the destroyers. It was afterwards sunk, but he reached a raft from which he was picked up next morning by another destroyer.

By then the convoys were approaching **Crete** and the decision for the naval authorities was whether all the ships should be sent to **Alexandria** or some to **Suda Bay**. As there was now insufficient room in the bay and because the changing situation 'made any further delay dangerous', the ships were regrouped 20 miles north of **Maleme** airfield with the **Royal Air Force** giving all possible cover. The naval vessels with some artillerymen, machine-gunners and the greater part of 7 Field Company went on to **Suda Bay**. The others formed an escort for the transports, *Glengyle*, *Salween*, *Khedive Ismail*, *Dilwarra*, *City of London* and *Costa Rica*, and proceeded towards

¹ See pp. 370– 1, 448– 63.

² **Capt L. Douglas**; born **Oamaru**, 2 Aug 1901; surgeon; medical officer **2 Gen Hosp** May 1940–Apr 1941; killed in action 27 Apr 1941.

³ **Lt J. W. Newlands**; born **Oamaru**, 17 Aug 1915; medical practitioner; medical officer, **Maadi Camp**, 1941; killed in action 27 Apr 1941.

⁴ **Pte V. H. Kellec**; **Arapihia**, Westport; born NZ 25 Nov 1909; labourer; wounded 16 May 1941.

Alexandria. Air attacks continued but little damage was done until about 3 p.m., when an aircraft came out of the sun, bombs hit the *Costa Rica* and she had to be abandoned. Although the ship was rising and falling some 18–20 feet, the destroyers *Hero*, *Hereward* and *Defender*

took off the 2500 Australians without the loss of a single life. These men were then taken to **Crete**.

The result was that by 29 April the New Zealand Artillery group was divided: 6 Field Regiment and the greater part of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment had reached **Alexandria** in the *Glengyle* but 4 and 5 Field Regiments were hopelessly dispersed, some men having arrived in the *Salween* and others having been taken to **Crete**, where they were to serve as infantrymen in the coming campaign.

The last embarkation of any importance that night was not arranged by the **Navy**. On the night of 25–26 April a group from **80 Base Sub-area** had moved out of **Athens** and, like the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion, was to have embarked from **Navplion**. But in the morning, 26 April, it had been diverted to **Tripolis**, where it remained all day under cover. That night it had gone south to **Yithion**, the port of **Sparta**. No arrangements had been made for its embarkation but an advance party had fortunately been able to charter three caiques, one of which was already engaged by some Greek Army cadets. They sailed that night, 26–27 April, two of them eventually reaching **Crete** and the third having to turn back with some **Royal Army Service Corps** personnel because it was too heavily laden.

TO GREECE

PREPARATIONS FOR DEFENCE

Preparations for Defence

TO defend the [Corinth Canal](#) area, and more particularly the bridge, a miscellaneous collection of units had been assembled, haphazardly and with no unity of command. In the earlier stages of the campaign eight 3·7-inch anti-aircraft guns, eight 3-inch and sixteen Bofors guns had moved into position. Some of the last named were in the immediate vicinity of the canal; others were to the south along the road to [Argos](#). On 23 April, when it was feared that the enemy advancing from Ioannina would reach the Gulf of [Corinth](#), the Greeks had sent a small force to Navpaktos and their Reserve Officers Battalion to Patrai. Having similar worries, General Wilson had sent **4 Hussars to protect the south bank of the canal and patrol the nearby shores of the gulf. With only twelve tanks, six carriers and one armoured car, the regiment, most of whose personnel were now riflemen, was responsible for a front of 70 miles. Consequently only four tanks were in the immediate vicinity of [Corinth](#).**

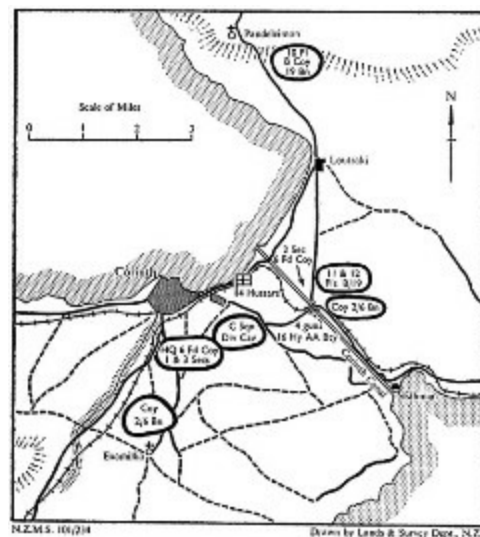
That night, at the request of Brigadier Steel (CRE [Anzac Corps](#)), **6 Field Company** which had been working with the Australians about [Thebes](#) was sent to the coast some three miles east of [Megara](#) and from there had to maintain the highway to and across the canal bridge. As explained to Captain Kelsall by Brigadier Puttick, ‘it was his route out ... it was badly straffed by dive bombers, and blocked ... by refugees, carts and donkeys going to the [Peloponnese](#).’ Kelsall had to maintain the highway, prepare the bridge for demolition, repair it if it was bombed and, if that was not possible, to see that **4 Brigade** could cross by a pontoon bridge. So next morning, 24 April, **No. 2 Section** (Lieutenant [Wheeler](#) ¹) was sent to prepare the bridge for demolition. The girders were strapped with gun-cotton and extra explosives placed under the abutments; TNT or gelignite was placed in the centre and wired to safety

fuses at the south end. 'It was the first bridge of that type

¹ Lt C. M. Wheeler; Singapore; born NZ 28 Dec 1914; civil engineer; wounded 25 Jun 1942.

which we had seen so we made certain of the job, having plenty of explosive. The general plan was to blow it so that it would drop and block the Canal.' ¹

The same day, as a result of the absence of air cover, a revised embarkation programme ² was drawn up at Headquarters **W Force**. Less use would be made of the beaches in **Attica** and more use of destroyers and the southern port of **Kalamata**. As the retention of the canal and the defence of the **Peloponnese** were then vitally important, Headquarters **W Force** sent Colonels J. S. Blunt and C. D. Quilliam to study the situation. They reported that Patrai was 'normal and quiet' but that the Greek commanders at both **Corinth** and **Tripolis**, though friendly, wanted authority from



CORINTH CANAL POSITIONS, 26 APRIL 1941

¹ Sapper L. D. Mumford, 6 Field Company.

Athens for any future action. Brigadier Lee was appointed area commander of the **Peloponnese** with definite instructions to be prepared for landings on the airfields, and **Isthmus Force** was formed to defend the canal area.

The Brigadier hastened to the canal area. That night (24–25 April) when **Allen Group** was crossing the bridge he asked the Australians for a battalion ‘to help guard the area against possible attack by German armour from the north or against paratroops.’¹ Three companies and two platoons from 2/6 Battalion were then detached, one being placed on the north side of the bridge, another with the two platoons going to the airfields near **Argos** and the third to the **Corinth** area to join **4 Hussars**.

On the same night Major Rattray had brought up to Brigadier Puttick from Headquarters **W Force**, now in **Athens**, the instructions about **Isthmus Force**. It would consist of a company of infantry, 6 Field Company already in the area, one section of 122 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery and one troop of **7 Armoured Division** Field Squadron, **Royal Engineers**.² If 4 Brigade, as was then planned, was evacuated from **Megara** on the night of 26–27 April, the force would blow both the road and the bridge and then hasten to embark from **Navplion**. Should the **Navy** fail to appear the brigade would withdraw across the canal, the force then coming under the command of Brigadier Puttick.

At 4 a.m. on 25 April Major R. K. Gordon was ordered to take B Company 19 Battalion to the canal area. There he would command **Isthmus Force**, carrying out the orders from **W Force** and an instruction from Brigadier Puttick that the road from the north-west through Loutraki must be held in strength. Leaving Lieutenant **Heiford**³ to take the company to a defensive position north of that village, Gordon went ahead to the canal area, where he expected to meet representatives from the other units of Isthmus Force. Apparently their orders did not arrive

until the afternoon for no one appeared at the meeting place. However, the anti-aircraft guns were in position; the engineers were completing their work about the bridge; and, to his surprise, Gordon found the company of Australian infantry on the north side of the canal in defence of the bridge and under the command of Colonel E. G. G. Lillingston of **4 Hussars**.

In his instructions Gordon had not been told about this defence system being arranged by **Lee Force**, nor had **Lee Force** any

¹ Long, p. 161.

² C Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and the carrier platoons of 22 and 28 (Maori) Battalions were added later.

³ **Capt H. R. Heiford**, ED; **Auckland**; born **Napier**, 10 Sep 1906; factory manager; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

information about the New Zealand company. It was therefore doubtful who was to be in command of the canal area; Gordon had his orders but Lillingston was the senior officer. To clear up the confusion Gordon visited Headquarters **Lee Force** at **Argos**, but he got no satisfaction and decided not to hand over his force until ordered to do so by Headquarters **W Force**. Much time was wasted discussing who would give the orders for **4 Hussars** to withdraw and it was evening before Gordon, still without definite instructions, was back across the canal checking the position of his company at Loutraki.

The platoons were on high ground about three miles north of the village and Gordon was satisfied with their positions until he was on his way back to establish headquarters near the canal. The country on either side of it was so suitable for parachute landings that he returned to his company and, in spite of the late hour, transferred two platoons to an area some 700–800 yards north of the canal.

That night, 25–26 April, several other units entered the canal area. The Australian company which had been detached to join 4 Hussars had finally been ordered by **General Freyberg** to clear a detour through the bomb-damaged streets of **Corinth**. That task complete, it had been sent to defend the ridge overlooking the road to the south of the canal.

Sixth Field Company, whose bivouac area east of **Megara** had become untenable because of strafing, moved across the canal to an area about two miles south of **Corinth**. Major Rudd, who had been acting CRE, rejoined Headquarters, which was in an olive grove with No. 1 Section (Lieutenant J. O. Wells); farther along the road was No. 3 Section (Lieutenant St. G. W. Chapman).

Finally, about 2.30 a.m. on 26 April, C Squadron New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment (Major **Harford**¹) came through from the **Mazi** area with the carrier platoons of 22 and 28 (Maori) Battalions. The journey had been delayed by petrol shortages and engine trouble and the 22 Battalion carriers, by missing the turn-off, had gone south of **Corinth** and out of the area in which the paratroops were soon to land. The cavalymen and the Maoris, however, had halted in the olive groves on the terraces between **Corinth** and the canal bridge. Once it was daylight Harford proposed to carry out the orders given to him at Divisional Headquarters at **Mazi**: to report to the 'OC **Isthmus Force**' and, on the withdrawal of 4 Brigade across the canal, to move his detachment westwards to **Patrai** and then southwards to **Kalamata**.

¹ **Lt-Col E. R. Harford**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Waitara; born **Nelson**, 8 Mar 1904; farm manager; 2 i/c Div Cav Regt Jan–Apr 1942.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS ATTACK FROM THE AIR

The Germans Attack from the Air

Now, on 24 April Marshal List had decided that the narrowness of the front and the state of the roads made it necessary for General Stumme (*XXXX Corps*) to control the advance, with *XVIII Corps* under command. He had to break through to **Athens** and establish a bridgehead over the **Corinth Canal**.

To accomplish the latter objective it was decided to use the parachute troops which had originally been assembled to take the island of Lemnos. ¹ No battle report describing the capture of the canal area has been discovered but the plan had been prepared shortly after the breakthrough at **Rupel Pass**. Reinforced, *Parachute Regiment 2* (Colonel Sturm), using five groups of Ju52s and 2000–2500 troops, was to land and block the escape of British troops to either **Crete** or **Egypt**; gliders were to be used to land troops close to the bridge to prevent its being destroyed; and the units already concentrated about **Larisa** were to attack on the morning of 26 April.

The *Luftwaffe* had hitherto been content to bomb **Argos** and **Corinth** and strafe the highway between them, but about seven o'clock that morning the canal area was heavily and systematically dive-bombed and machine-gunned. The anti-aircraft gunners were magnificent, but before long many of them were wounded and all their guns wrecked. Then about 7.25 a.m. the Ju52s came over, flying low in groups of three to drop the many-coloured parachutes supporting the troopers and their supplies. At the same time gliders crash-landed near the bridge, the men from one near its south end rushing on to clear the demolitions. They were cutting the fuses when the charges exploded, killing them all and so wrecking the bridge that it dropped neatly into the canal.

The reason for the explosion is still a mystery. Sapper **Eastgate** ² at

the north end and Sapper **Mumford**³ on the open south bank, picketting the approaches to the bridge, had been surrounded and were unable to do anything. There was no anti-aircraft fire by that time and there was no artillery in the area, so it is hardly likely that a charge was hit by shell splinters.

But there are other possibilities. Two British officers—Lieutenant J. T. Tyson, **Royal Engineers**, who had assisted the New Zealand engineers to prepare the charges, and Captain J. P. Phillips of the **Devonshire Regiment**—had spent the night south of the bridge,

¹ The occupation of Lemnos had been part of the move of Lustre Force to **Greece** but 1 Battalion, The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, which had been landed on 4 April, had been evacuated on 12 April. With other islands, Lemnos was occupied on 23 April by units of *164 Division*, transported on a German steamer, Greek fishing craft and two Italian destroyers.

² **Spr F. T. Eastgate; Lower Hutt**; born NZ 15 Oct 1912; labourer; wounded 24 Jun 1942.

³ **Spr L. D. Mumford**; born NZ 19 Nov 1913; labourer; p.w. Apr 1941.

and when the Germans landed Tyson had suggested attempting to light the fuse. But it was 'not more than fifteen feet from the plane which had landed.'¹ They had therefore crawled to a shelter bank from which Phillips had fired at the charges strapped to the bridge. After his second shot the explosion² occurred. They then slipped away to the south-east, joining men from the anti-aircraft batteries and eventually crossing the hills to the **Navplion** embarkation area.

Such an explosion was possible, for early in the campaign curious engineers had placed some TNT in a bank and found that it could be exploded by rifle fire. But several who worked on the bridge think that the only explosive strapped in packets on the outside of the girders was

wet gun-cotton, which could not be exploded by rifle fire. ³ Others, however, state that there was some TNT on the deck of the bridge which could have been hit by rifle bullets. There is also a report that two sappers from 6 New Zealand Field Company south of the bridge made a dash and lit the fuse. 'Just short of the bridge one of the boys fell. The other made the bridge ... he seemed to fall but the next moment I saw he was coming back. He looked to have cleared the bridge when it seemed to heave....' ⁴

The Germans, however, make no reference to any spectacular rush to light the fuse; in fact one account states that British resistance had 'decreased almost to the vanishing point', and another that a war correspondent was actually standing on the bridge 'making a film for the weekly newsreel.' Moreover, their signals sent back during the action give three different explanations for the explosion. The first, which was despatched at 9.45 a.m., stated that the bridge was blown; others stated that it was blown by a remotely controlled or delayed charge; and finally at 11.20 a.m. Colonel Meister signalled, 'Bridge over canal not blown but destroyed by shellfire.'

Those who had been ordered to capture the bridge intact were very disappointed and exceedingly curious, and after the fighting was over any captured officer who might have some information was carefully cross-examined. Lieutenant Heiford was even asked if there had been a line from the bridge to his position over four miles away. The opinion of senior German officers after the war was that, 'The bridge itself was blown up, not however by blasting by the British according to plan but by a mere accident. The parachute officer commissioned to remove the explosive charges

¹ 'The Events at the **Corinth Canal**, 26 April 1941': report by Captain J. P. Phillips, MC.

² Wilson, p. 98: 'The possibility of this method of setting off the charge has been disputed but on the advice of experts I gave

the officers a M.C.’

³ ‘I am very sorry that the story of the Sapper officer blowing up the bridge by firing at the charges is untrue, but it never seemed likely to me!!’—Latham to [Kippenberger](#) 14 Nov 1955.

⁴ H. E. Smith, 16 Jul 1947.

had piled up the already complete explosive charges owing to a misunderstanding. Coming from a long distance a chance hit of this pile effected the detonation and thus the collapse of the bridge.’ ¹

The two platoons of B Company 19 Battalion in the shelter of the olive groves had not apparently been observed by the enemy, for Gordon had time to organise an attack in support of the Australians. But the small force was soon driven to ground and facing counter-attacks on both flanks. The bridge had been demolished by that time so Gordon decided that the platoons, already short of ammunition, must attempt to join 4 Brigade at [Megara](#). ² Leaving the wounded with Second-Lieutenant [Ferguson](#), ³ who was himself a casualty, Gordon withdrew but before long both he and Second-Lieutenant [Budd](#) ⁴ had been wounded. Warrant Officer [Jones](#) ⁵ then took command of the remnants, who got clear of the canal area and then attempted in small parties to find 4 Brigade. Some actually reached ⁶ [Megara](#) and from there joined 4 Brigade at [Porto Rafti](#); the majority were captured; others, assisted by the Greeks, eventually reached Egypt.

The third platoon from B Company in the Loutraki area had seen the paratroopers come down but was too far away to take any part in the action. After midday Greeks warned Lieutenant Heiford that the enemy was in the village and at dusk the platoon hastened to the coast, capturing on the way a drunken paratroop officer who was using a captured motor-cycle. But by the time they had found two rowing boats it was too late to cross the Gulf of [Corinth](#). They waited, hoping to get the use of a motor boat, but next day an English-speaking Greek

appeared with the Greek police to say that the cave was surrounded by Germans. As there was no chance of escape the whole platoon had to surrender.

Units on the south bank had more chances to escape. The Australian company was outside the area in which the paratroops landed, but 'before long paratroops supported by machine-gun fire were advancing towards its position.'⁷ The commander thereupon decided to move back towards **Argos**. On the way south the Australians were given transport by the companies of 26 Battalion which had been sent north to block the southward advance of the

¹ Supplement to the essay, 'The Balkan Campaign', by prisoners of war in Allendorf Camp, 1947.

² 4 Brigade embarked from **Porto Rafti**. For the change in plan see pp. 424– 5.

³ Capt C. A. L. Ferguson; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 2 Oct 1915; hardware salesman; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

⁴ Capt F. M. S. Budd; Hastings; born Waihi, 19 May 1913; factory supervisor; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

⁵ WO II J. M. C. Jones; Okoia, Wanganui; born Wanganui, 10 May 1916; farm labourer; p.w. 27 Apr 1941.

⁶ See pp. 411– 12.

⁷ Long, p. 167.

enemy. Remaining in touch with 6 Brigade, the company eventually embarked with it from **Monemvasia**.

Headquarters **4 Hussars** was a total loss but by midnight the three squadrons (with patrols from GHQ Liaison Regiment under command) had withdrawn to Patrai. As a German landing was imminent, they moved south that afternoon towards **Tripolis** and **Kalamata**.

The advance parties from 4 Brigade were less fortunate. The brigade intelligence officer got away with two men, met A Company 26 Battalion and reported to **Divisional Headquarters**,¹ but the supply officer with four men was afterwards reported 'so far missing.'

Sixth Field Company (less the section at the bridge and the two sub-sections on the **Athens** road) in its more sheltered area had escaped the early strafing but its position was soon desperate. Major Rudd, who went forward towards the bridge, met survivors of No. 2 Section and with them withdrew towards **Argos**. Meanwhile Kelsall had organised the rest of the company and put up a stout defence, the Germans afterwards recording 'heavy casualties' in the area. But outnumbered, short of weapons and harassed by mortar fire, the company withdrew that afternoon in small groups. Lieutenant Chapman² and his section got clear. Lieutenant Wells and his group, after going through the outskirts of **Corinth** and reaching the south road, were taken by a Greek to an air-raid shelter where they planned to stay until nightfall. But a Greek officer appeared with some paratroopers and the party was captured and taken to the prisoner-of-war cage at the cemetery.

Kelsall and some fifteen other ranks crawled through the low vines, came unexpectedly upon a farmhouse occupied by Germans and then scattered. Kelsall and another sapper escaped, joined two Australians and two English soldiers from the anti-aircraft batteries and with them went over the hills hoping to reach **Navplion**. Informed by Greeks that embarkation from that port had ceased, they turned south-east through wild, romantic country and eventually reached the coast, from which on 29 April they were ferried across the bay to Spetsai Island. Here two officers and 40 other ranks of **4 Hussars** appeared with some Australians. The combined parties hired a caique and sailed to Velopoula, where they

picked up a sub-lieutenant from **Piræus**, whose boat had been shot up off the island. That night, 1–2 May, the party weathered a severe storm and reached Milos with a disabled ship. While they were attempting to obtain another more escapees arrived and other ships ³ called on their way to **Crete**. Finally on 8 May, after a Cretan colonel had

¹ See p. 424.

² Chapman arrived in **Crete** with two officers and sixteen men on 11 May.

³ See p. 441, note 3.

forced the Greeks to produce a ship, the party prepared to sail—in all 320, including 180 Cretans from the Albanian front. But next evening as the ship was about to leave Milos, three German motor boats appeared and the odyssey came to an end. ¹

Other men of 6 Field Company were more fortunate. Sapper **Carson**, ² after being wounded and cared for in hospitals at **Corinth** and **Piræus**, escaped with Lance-Bombardier **Marshall** ³ of 7 Anti- Tank Regiment and reached Euboea. From there they sailed to Skiros and were taken by Greek fishermen to **Turkey**, reaching Egypt in September 1941. Sapper **Stuart** ⁴ escaped into the hills to join two other sappers and two Australians. The peasants were hospitable— ‘we were kissed, wept over, given bread, cheese and wine and provided with a guide in the space of half-an-hour.’ They eventually reached an island and became members of a party of sixty-four New Zealanders, Englishmen and Australians who were eventually taken by Greeks to **Turkey**.

The only other New Zealand units in the **Corinth** area were C Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and the carrier platoon from 28 (Maori) Battalion. The landing began while the men were still digging in and before Major Harford could find the ‘OC Isthmus Force’, but the

units put up a solid resistance, WO II Seccombe ⁵ being very effective with his Vickers. But it was soon obvious that the group would be overwhelmed, so with the intention of withdrawing and then reorganising, orders were given by wireless and by runner for the units to withdraw along a track which seemed, according to the map, to rejoin the main road south of **Corinth**. The crews from three or four **Divisional Cavalry** and four or five Maori carriers did not get clear by this route; some were casualties, some prisoners, and others the fortunate crews of carriers which reached the highway. The main party—two armoured cars and five carriers of C Squadron (about thirty men) and two carriers from 28 (Maori) Battalion (about ten men)—got clear, but the track petered out and the carriers were eventually run into a deep gully. The crews, guided by Greeks and very exhausted, then hurried over the hills towards **Navplion**, hoping that they would be in time for the embarkation ⁶ which was to take place that night.

The Germans were not able to interfere with this operation nor had they captured the bridge intact, but they had split the British

¹ German reports state that '19 Officers and 105 English OR' were captured.

² **Spr S. E. Carson**, m.i.d.; **Lyttelton**; born **Lyttelton**, 9 Dec 1914; plumber; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941; escaped Jul 1941; safe in Egypt Sep 1941.

³ **Bdr F. S. Marshall**; born NZ 3 Nov 1914; insurance agent; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped Jul 1941; safe in Egypt Sep 1941; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

⁴ **Spr J. B. Stuart**; **Te Awamutu**; born **Auckland**, 28 Nov 1910; farmer.

⁵ **Capt G. T. Seccombe**, DCM, m.i.d.; **Upper Hutt**; born **Whangarei**, 27 Oct 1915; Regular soldier; wounded and p.w. 1

Jun 1941.

⁶ See p. 429.

forces in **Greece**. South of the canal were the units to be evacuated from **Navplion**, **Monemvasia** and **Kalamata**. To the north artillery regiments were already assembling to embark from the **Marathon** beaches, but the rearguard—4 Brigade and units from 1 Armoured Brigade—was still in position south of **Thebes**. Their successful evacuation now depended upon the receipt of wireless messages ¹ from **General Freyberg**, upon the flexibility of the overall plan, and upon the efficiency of the **Navy**.

Thus it was natural that in all German reports the action was described as yet another triumph. At the cost of only one or two aircraft, 63 killed, 158 wounded and 16 missing, they had captured the canal area; the Allied casualties were not stated but the Germans claimed to have 921 British and 1450 Greek prisoners of war. Later they argued that the attack had been excellent training for the airborne troops who were soon to make the landing on **Crete**.

More important, however, was the Germans' failure to appreciate the strength of the force now isolated on the ridges south of **Thebes**. Had they realised that it was 4 Brigade Group and not just a small rearguard they would undoubtedly have made greater efforts to prevent its eventual evacuation. ²

¹ See pp. 424– 5.

² See pp. 437– 41.

TO GREECE

ACTION IS TAKEN TO PREVENT THE PARACHUTE TROOPS MOVING SOUTH

Action is taken to prevent the Parachute Troops moving South

The security of 4 Brigade and the successful embarkation that night of the units assembled about **Navplion** were the major problems for **General Freyberg**, who was now at **Miloi**, a fishing port and the headquarters of both **W Force** and New Zealand Division. The first warnings which were received about 9 a.m. suggested that only a hundred paratroopers had landed. But when Lieutenant-Colonel Lillingston of **4 Hussars**, who was also present, stated that he had only thirty men in the area, **Freyberg** gave verbal orders to Brigadier Barrowclough for 6 Brigade to give some support. Lieutenant-Colonel Page of 26 Battalion was thereupon instructed to prevent the parachute force blocking the withdrawal that night of 4 Brigade across the canal. Two rifle companies and the carrier platoon would assist troops in the area; the rest of the battalion would remain in reserve some three or four miles north of **Argos**. The move was urgent and 'relatively high density' on the highway had to be risked; 'the utmost speed was essential.'³

Soon afterwards the first stragglers came through from **Corinth** with exaggerated accounts of the attack and the suggestion that the Germans were already striking south towards **Argos** and **Navplion**.

³ 6 Brigade to Lt-Col Page, 26 April.

Later there was a telephone message from a detachment of 4 Hussars west of **Corinth** stating that the Germans were crossing in small boats in the vicinity of Patrai. The General consequently made every effort to cover the embarkation which was to take place that night from **Navplion**. In the **Argos** area Brigadier Lee was put in charge of one and a

half companies of 2/6 Australian Battalion, the troops from 2 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery, remnants of 3 Royal Tank Regiment who had been Force Headquarters guard, two 'Bofors A Tk guns' and about two platoons of stragglers. There they would remain until nightfall, when they would move south to prepare a defensive position outside **Monemvasia**. In the **Miloi** area 25 Battalion remained in reserve. The original task for 6 Brigade, the holding of the road junction at **Tripolis**, was therefore delegated to 24 Battalion, which moved south soon after midday.

A and D Companies 26 Battalion had already moved off to assist the troops in the canal area 'to retain possession of the bridge'. ¹ The sky was clear and enemy aircraft were about, but the orders were to push forward, stopping only if there were direct attacks. D Company was halted by punctures and minor damage due to machine-gunning but A Company (Captain **Milliken** ²) carried on, one lorry eventually being hit before the troops could take cover. The majority of those on board were wounded and the vehicle was soon blazing fiercely, but in spite of more machine-gunning at least twelve men were saved by Privates **Struthers**, ³ **Morrison** ⁴ and **Delaney**, ⁵ who dragged them into a nearby culvert.

The troops were eventually forced by enemy aircraft to take cover just north of Golomos, a village five miles south of **Corinth**. Shortly afterwards in the narrow gorge ahead of them they saw the helmets of a German advance party. The enemy were neatly rounded up and ten Allied soldiers set free. Lieutenant-Colonel Page arrived shortly afterwards, D Company followed and the two companies deployed along the ridge on either side of the gorge. As they were doing so a lorry with 28 (Maori) Battalion markings appeared. The German driver was killed and the German recognition flag confiscated. The companies then completed their move to the crest of the ridge, from which they engaged the approaching paratroopers. Shortly afterwards the air attacks were renewed, it was difficult to move forward, and there seemed little chance of the companies ever reaching **Corinth**.

¹ 6 Brigade to Lt-Col Page, 26 April.

² **Maj T. Milliken**, m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1896; solicitor; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

³ **Pte H. E. Struthers**, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 19 Oct 1917; musterer; twice wounded; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

⁴ **L-Cpl A. R. Morrison**, MM, m.i.d.; **Timaru**; born **Gisborne**, 12 Aug 1916; shop assistant; wounded and p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

⁵ **Sgt F. O. Delaney**, m.i.d.; **Blenheim**; born **Nelson**, 29 Aug 1917; farmer; wounded Nov 1942.

The problem was solved for them by the appearance of Lieutenant **Beale**, ¹ Intelligence Officer 4 Brigade, from the direction of **Corinth**. As he reported that the bridge had been blown that morning, there was no need for the companies to remain in their isolated position. Orders had therefore been issued for the move back to the vehicles, but Major J. I. Brooke, from Headquarters 6 Brigade, appeared with fresh instructions: **General Freyberg**, now that more information had been received, did not think that the two companies were strong enough for the task assigned to them so they were to withdraw and cover the approach to **Navplion** from the high ground north of **Argos**.

After further delays due to air attacks and damaged transport the companies moved south, assisting wherever possible the British and Australian stragglers ²—some one to two hundred—who were trudging back on foot. When in position astride the road near the village of Nemea, they remained until midnight. In all there had been twenty-one casualties, including four killed and two who later died of wounds.

The rest of the battalion had moved forward during the afternoon to **Ano Fikhtia**, a village about 20 miles north of **Miloi**, where they had

settled in with orders to remain until midnight covering the approaches to **Navplion**; after that they would withdraw, even if the forward companies had not yet come through.

¹ **Maj J. H. Beale, m.i.d.; Christchurch**; born England, 3 Apr 1912; salesman.

² See pp. 419– 20.

TO GREECE

NEW PLANS AND FURTHER WITHDRAWALS, 26 APRIL

New Plans and Further Withdrawals, 26 April

The day had also been very tense and exciting for the Divisional Headquarters staff at **Miloi**. Once the news had been received of the probable capture of the canal area fresh plans had been hastily prepared, particularly for the 4 Brigade Group in the **Kriekouki** area whose position was even more perilous than that of 6 Brigade in the **Peloponnese**. Using the **Middle East** and naval wireless links, **General Freyberg** had attempted to warn Brigadier Puttick but for several hours there was no response to any signals. Efforts were therefore made to get in touch with Brigadier Charrington of 1 Armoured Brigade, who was known to have a No. 9 wireless set at his headquarters north of **Rafina**. As all codes had been destroyed the message was sent in clear:

Operation Priority. Send LO and tell Puttick that **Corinth Canal** has been captured by German parachute troops. Instead of withdrawing as ordered he is to move and withdraw from the beaches Hargest used. From N.Z. Division.

To the intense relief of **General Freyberg** a message came back from 1 Armoured Brigade asking for the date of evacuation. This was, as yet, undecided but the reply was that shipping would probably be available that night or the next.

Wilson and **Freyberg** had also arranged for the evacuations south of the canal. From **Monemvasia** the **Navy** would take off 6 New Zealand Brigade and all troops not directed to **Kalamata**. At the same time it was decided that Wilson and **W Force** Headquarters should be responsible for the evacuation of non-fighting troops. ¹ This left **Freyberg** responsible for **Lee Force** in the **Argos** area, for **4 Hussars** now hastening south from **Patrai** and for 6 Brigade assembling about **Tripolis**. No reference was made to the troops assembling still farther south at **Kalamata**; in fact

the only reference to them by **General Freyberg** is his statement that he had not been informed of the large group to be evacuated from that port.

The withdrawal of **4 Hussars** was the most difficult to direct. In the morning when news was received of the parachute landings, Colonel Lillingston at **Divisional Headquarters** had asked **Freyberg** to extricate his three squadrons from the Patrai area. One of their officers was immediately sent to get in touch with them and towards evening two others, with petrol and Greek money, were sent with orders for the squadron to withdraw through **Tripolis**. To prevent any diversion Greek guides had been stationed along the route to direct the approaching columns. The advanced guard joined **6 Brigade** at **Tripolis**, linked up with the survivors from the **Corinth** area and with them was evacuated with **6 Brigade** from **Monemvasia**. But the main body—some 300 strong—seems to have mistrusted the Greeks for it continued south to become involved in the disaster at **Kalamata**.

Other units were more fortunate. After suffering some casualties from air attacks **24 Battalion** had moved south that afternoon, **26 April**, to the **Tripolis** area. Beyond **Miloi** there was the endless series of hairpin bends to the crest of the Ktenas Range, a wild and rugged country looking more charming than it really is because of its softness of tone and harmony of colours. Thence the road swung down to **Tripolis** at the crossroads of the **Peloponnese**. To the west dark hills overlooked the town, but elsewhere there were fertile fields of corn, grapes and tobacco, groves of oak trees and avenues of cypress trees.

There had been more strafing en route but the widely dispersed trucks and efficient lookouts had prevented any serious damage. The only mishap was the loss of one and a half platoons from **A Company** and one platoon and a small group from **B Company**. The military police outside the town had been instructed to divert all **24 Battalion** transport into **Tripolis**, but these platoons had been left to continue along the road to **Kalamata** with the reinforcement troops, the Palestinian labour units and the Australian detachments hurrying to join their units. The depleted battalion had meanwhile taken control of the roads leading into

Patrai, C Company that from **Kalamata** and D Company the highway along which it travelled from **Miloi**.

At nightfall, 26–27 April, the main withdrawal began, **General Freyberg** and his staff leaving **Miloi** to set up headquarters some ten miles south of **Tripolis** and **Lee Force** moving from the **Argos** area through **Tripolis** to **Sparta** and the approaches to **Monemvasia**.

Headquarters 6 Brigade followed about midnight to the high country east of **Tripolis**; with it were the detachments from 22 and 23 Battalions which had, as **Hart Force**, masked the approaches to the **Thermopylae** line. About the same time 26 Battalion pulled out from **Ano Fikhtia**, leaving a small party to link up with A and D Companies when they came through from their rearguard position north of **Argos**. Next morning the battalion was off the road and under cover east of **Tripolis**. Twenty-fifth Battalion had followed up to a position astride the road at **Akhladhokambos**, a village in the hills to the north of **Tripolis**. The three battalions now controlled the approaches to the town and there they were to remain until after dark on the night of 27–28 April, when they would withdraw to **Monemvasia** for embarkation the following night.

¹ The source of this statement is the Division's 'G' Branch war diary; it probably refers to the troops to be evacuated that night from **Navplion**, many of them being Base Details.

TO GREECE

EVACUATIONS CONTINUE DURING THE NIGHT 26-27 APRIL

Evacuations Continue during the Night 26-27 April

The night was also notable for the number of successful embarkations. At **Miloi** the Force Headquarters group had assembled on the quay, confident about a caique which one of the staff had chartered but doubtful about the destroyers and the flying boat whose despatch had not been confirmed by the authorities in **Crete**. The flying boat was there but no destroyer. After waiting until midnight Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman, who wished to take his staff and beachmasters to **Monemvasia**, left in the caique, but shortly afterwards the *Havock* arrived and in her the party hastened down the coast, enemy air superiority making it essential to reach the port before daylight. Outside the port they unexpectedly came upon the ten LCAs ¹ sent on from the bombed

¹ See p. 428.

Glennarn. The party landed in them and waited in a small bay four miles north of **Monemvasia**; the LCAs were scattered along the beaches about half a mile apart.

At **Miloi** itself the patience of the flying-boat group—General Wilson, **Prince Peter of Greece** and certain Greek Ministers, Major-General T. G. G. Heywood and some members of the British Military Mission—had been severely tested. As the pilot explained, he could not risk a landing in **Suda Bay** until 6.30 a.m. and he could not make an immediate departure because he had not the petrol to remain in the air all that night. Consequently they had to wait. The hours passed by; the 6 Brigade rearguard passed through to **Tripolis**. Since there was then no force between the flying boat and the advancing enemy, the pilot taxied off down the coast in an unpleasantly choppy sea until at last he was able

to take off for **Crete**.

On the coast east of **Athens** the rearguard position about **Tatoi** had been maintained during the day by **1 Rangers**, A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, N Troop **34 Anti-Tank Battery** and L/N Battery **2 Royal Horse Artillery**; in the evening C Company **1 Rangers** and N Troop **34 Anti-Tank Battery** had covered the withdrawal to the beaches at **Rafina**. Assembled there when the *Glengyle* arrived off shore with the destroyers *Nubian*, *Decoy* and *Hasty* were 6 Field Regiment, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 2 Royal Horse Artillery, 102 Anti-Tank Regiment, 155 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** (less C Squadron), 1 Armoured Brigade and many odd detachments from the **Athens** area, such as the group of New Zealand reinforcements who had been guarding the **Hassani** airfield. Uncertain about their orders to move with the Reinforcement Battalion to **Navplion**, the men had collected some thirty stragglers of all nationalities in **Athens** and then followed their original orders to move to **Rafina**.

Owing to the heavy swell the *Glengyle* had to remain a mile and a half out to sea; this meant that if the convoy was to sail at 3 a.m. the last boat had to leave the beach by 2.15 a.m. The result was that, although men ¹ were taken to the destroyers as well as to the *Glengyle*, several hundred were still on the beach when the convoy departed.

There were 800 of 1 Armoured Brigade, 250 of **1 Rangers**, 117 of 102 Anti-Tank Regiment and many New Zealanders from 34 Anti-Tank Battery, 4 Machine Gun Company and A Squadron **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**. On the orders of Brigadier Charrington the groups moved to the low ridge on the southern edge of the beach. There in the shelter of the laurels, myrtles and

¹ 3503 all ranks—according to naval reports.

scattered olive trees they took cover and hoped for the return of the **Navy** the following night.

At **Porto Rafti**¹ there had been the troopship *Salween*, the cruiser *Carlisle* and the destroyers *Kandahar* and *Kingston*. Most of Advanced Headquarters New Zealand Artillery, 4 Field Regiment, 5 Field Regiment and 64 Medium Regiment (less Headquarters 234 Battery and D Troop) went aboard the *Salween*. Sections from the last named and from 5 Field Park Company and 7 Field Company were also taken by the troopship; the remainder left in the escort vessels. Headquarters 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, with 2 Company complete and 1 Company, less 1 and 3 Platoons with 4 Brigade, had come south with **Duff Force**. Second-Lieutenant **Luxford**² and a small group were now manning the road blocks until 4 Brigade reached the area but the others went aboard the *Salween*, complete with Vickers guns less tripods. To their surprise 3 Company was already aboard, having come south with 6 Brigade and been directed³ from **Mazi** to **Porto Rafti** for embarkation.

The night was also notable for the reappearance of the 500 men⁴ who had been taken to **Kea Island** on the night of 24–25 April. To their great relief a naval officer had appeared about noon on 26 April to say that the tank landing craft would be leaving the other side of the island at 8 p.m. The men had been hurriedly called together and in groups of twenty despatched across the mountains. Once the majority had arrived the landing craft had hastened to **Porto Rafti**. The heavy ground swell prevented all but a few getting aboard the *Salween*, but the others eventually got aboard the *Carlisle*. In the meantime the destroyer *Nubian* had called at the island only to find that the men had already been collected. Three fortunate men from the Supply Column who had missed the LCT were then evacuated.

The convoy sailed at 3 a.m., 27 April; the destination of the troops was to be decided later that night.

In the **Peloponnese**, units embarked from **Navplion**, **Tolos** and the southern port of **Kalamata**. According to the original plan, the landing ship *Glenearn* was to have gone to **Navplion** but she was bombed and disabled; her invaluable landing craft had to be disembarked and sent to

Monemvasia. ⁵ Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell thereupon sent the destroyer *Stuart* to assist the ships already at **Tolos** and took the cruisers *Orion* and *Perth* to **Navplion**, where the

¹ 4720 all ranks—according to naval reports.

² Lt M. B. Luxford; Hastings; born **Wanganui**, 14 Mar 1913; grocer.

³ See pp. 407– 8.

⁴ See p. 403.

⁵ They were practically the only means of embarkation from **Monemvasia** for 6 NZ Brigade on the night of 28–29 April. See pp. 426– 7, 446.

cruiser *Calcutta*, the troopships *Slamat* and *Khedive Ismail* and four destroyers were already anchored.

At **Navplion** the hulk of the *Ulster Prince* made it impossible for the destroyers to get alongside the quays and the choppy sea made it dangerous to use small boats; in fact one report has it that 100 men were drowned. And there was only one motor caique transporting men to the *Slamat*, so although the **Navy** did what it could with its own boats the *Khedive Ismail* embarked no troops at all.

To complicate matters word was received during the embarkation that the *Stuart* at **Tolos** was full and that many troops still remained ashore. The *Stuart* was thereupon brought back to **Navplion**, her troops were transferred to the *Orion*, and with the *Perth* she was sent back to continue the embarkation. The naval records state that 1559 were taken off from **Tolos**; another source ¹ states that about 2000 embarked and that some 1300 were left on the beach.

The cruisers, destroyers and the troopship *Slamat* took away from **Navplion** a possible 2968 men; another source states that they sailed with 2600 men, leaving 1700 ashore,² including 700 from the Australian Reinforcement Battalion.

The LCT which had been operating at **Navplion** departed next morning for **Monemvasia**³ with 600 Australians, but the evacuation was still incomplete. According to the naval sources approximately 5500 men, and not the 8000 as planned, had been evacuated from the area (**Navplion** and **Tolos**).

The troops evacuated had been for the most part from Base and **W Force** Headquarters, but there had also been fighting units such as 3 Royal Tank Regiment, less C Squadron,⁴ and small detachments of New Zealand troops, including some medical orderlies from 1 General Hospital⁵ and the remainder of E Section (Workshops) 4 RMT Company.⁶ There were also those wounded from **Megara** who had been fortunate enough to be south of the **Corinth Canal** before the parachutists landed. Less fortunate were the men from C Squadron **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment who had managed to cross the hills from the **Corinth Canal** area. Sent to the tail of a long column 'with a half promise that there might be some room in a ship', they had almost reached the water's edge when embarkation stopped and they were once again left to their own resources.

At **Kalamata** there had been less trouble getting aboard ship but more men left on the beaches. Instead of some 8000 men collecting

¹ Long, p. 170.

² Ibid., p. 171.

³ See p. 444.

⁴ See p. 451.

⁵ See p. 404.

⁶ See p. 405.

in the area for embarkation there had been about 15,000. The first to get away were 16–17 Australian Brigade Group and some base details, in all about 8650 men in the troopships *Dilwarra*, *City of London* and *Costa Rica* and their screen of five destroyers. But left patiently waiting on the beach were still 7000 men, including the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion. ¹

Next morning all three convoys were still within range of German aircraft. The ships from *Kalamata* and those from *Rafina* and *Porto Rafti* were attacked on several occasions but no great damage was done. The convoy from *Navplion* and *Tolos* was less fortunate. By leaving the former port at 4.15 a.m., although ordered to do so at 3 a.m., the *Slamat* was exposed to too great a risk. At 7 a.m. bombers came over; the transport was hit and began to sink. The destroyer *Diamond* was sent to her aid and about 9 a.m., when three more destroyers joined the convoy, the *Wryneck* was sent to help with the rescue work. Most of the survivors had been picked up but at 10.25 a.m. the *Wryneck* signalled for fighter protection. Then all was blank until a destroyer that night picked up some survivors. From the two destroyers and the *Slamat*, on which there were some 500 soldiers, only 1 officer, 41 ratings and 8 soldiers survived. Among those drowned were the New Zealand medical officers Captains *Douglas* ² and *Newlands*. ³ They had been members of a group of 12 medical officers and 24 orderlies who had been sent aboard the transports by the *Middle East* command, which wished for the best and earliest care to be given to the evacuated troops. Of the eight New Zealanders in the *Slamat* only one was saved: Private *Kellec*, ⁴ who was taken aboard one of the destroyers. It was afterwards sunk, but he reached a raft from which he was picked up next morning by another destroyer.

By then the convoys were approaching **Crete** and the decision for the naval authorities was whether all the ships should be sent to **Alexandria** or some to **Suda Bay**. As there was now insufficient room in the bay and because the changing situation 'made any further delay dangerous', the ships were regrouped 20 miles north of **Maleme** airfield with the **Royal Air Force** giving all possible cover. The naval vessels with some artillerymen, machine-gunners and the greater part of 7 Field Company went on to **Suda Bay**. The others formed an escort for the transports, *Glengyle*, *Salween*, *Khedive Ismail*, *Dilwarra*, *City of London* and *Costa Rica*, and proceeded towards

¹ See pp. 370– 1, 448– 63.

² **Capt L. Douglas**; born **Oamaru**, 2 Aug 1901; surgeon; medical officer 2 Gen Hosp May 1940–Apr 1941; killed in action 27 Apr 1941.

³ **Lt J. W. Newlands**; born **Oamaru**, 17 Aug 1915; medical practitioner; medical officer, **Maadi Camp**, 1941; killed in action 27 Apr 1941.

⁴ **Pte V. H. Kellec**; **Arapihia**, **Westport**; born **NZ** 25 Nov 1909; labourer; wounded 16 May 1941.

Alexandria. Air attacks continued but little damage was done until about 3 p.m., when an aircraft came out of the sun, bombs hit the *Costa Rica* and she had to be abandoned. Although the ship was rising and falling some 18–20 feet, the destroyers *Hero*, *Hereward* and *Defender* took off the 2500 Australians without the loss of a single life. These men were then taken to **Crete**.

The result was that by 29 April the New Zealand Artillery group was divided: 6 Field Regiment and the greater part of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment had reached **Alexandria** in the *Glengyle* but 4 and 5 Field Regiments were hopelessly dispersed, some men having arrived in the *Salween* and

others having been taken to **Crete**, where they were to serve as infantrymen in the coming campaign.

The last embarkation of any importance that night was not arranged by the **Navy**. On the night of 25–26 April a group from **80 Base Sub-area** had moved out of **Athens** and, like the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion, was to have embarked from **Navplion**. But in the morning, 26 April, it had been diverted to **Tripolis**, where it remained all day under cover. That night it had gone south to **Yithion**, the port of **Sparta**. No arrangements had been made for its embarkation but an advance party had fortunately been able to charter three caiques, one of which was already engaged by some Greek Army cadets. They sailed that night, 26–27 April, two of them eventually reaching **Crete** and the third having to turn back with some **Royal Army Service Corps** personnel because it was too heavily laden.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 20 – THE EVACUATION CONTINUES

CHAPTER 20

The Evacuation Continues

The German Advance from Thermopylae

AT 2.30 a.m. on 25 April the advanced guard of the German forces had entered **Molos** soon after 6 New Zealand Brigade Group had left the **Thermopylae** line. Units from *Baacke Group* hastened along the coast road, reaching **Atalandi** by midday and then continuing either along the coast or inland to **Levadhia**, where they were halted by a demolished bridge.

Next day, 26 April, there were clear-cut orders from General Stumme. ¹ *Fifth Panzer Division* was to advance beyond **Thebes**, the main body approaching **Corinth** and a small force entering **Athens** and the ports of **Piræus**, Lavrion and **Marathon**. Units of *XVIII Corps* were to occupy the country north of **Athens** and east of Amfiklia; away to the west elements of *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division* were to advance to the Gulf of **Corinth**, cross to Patrai and enter **Corinth** from the west.

The forward elements of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*, a unit of *XXXX Corps*, thereupon advanced beyond **Thebes** and came under fire from 4 New Zealand Brigade Group at **Kriekouki**. The artillery with this reconnaissance force then went into action but no immediate attempt was made to approach **Athens** by this route. The main body of *I/31 Panzer Regiment* turned eastwards along the **Khalkis** road to the Spaidhes area, beyond which there was no further movement by tanks. But *8 Reconnaissance Unit* and the motor-cycle platoon of *47 Anti-Tank Unit*, ² using armoured cars, continued southwards and by nightfall were at and even beyond Malakasa, a village east of **Thebes** and north of **Athens**. In the same area there were *2 Motor Cycle Battalion* and elements of *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment*. After landing on the northern shores of Euboea they had moved south to **Khalkis** and returned to the mainland by boat or across the bridge, which they had repaired late that afternoon. As they had orders to approach **Athens** and

not the

¹ Commander of *XXXX Corps* and, temporarily, of *XVIII Corps*. See p. 417.

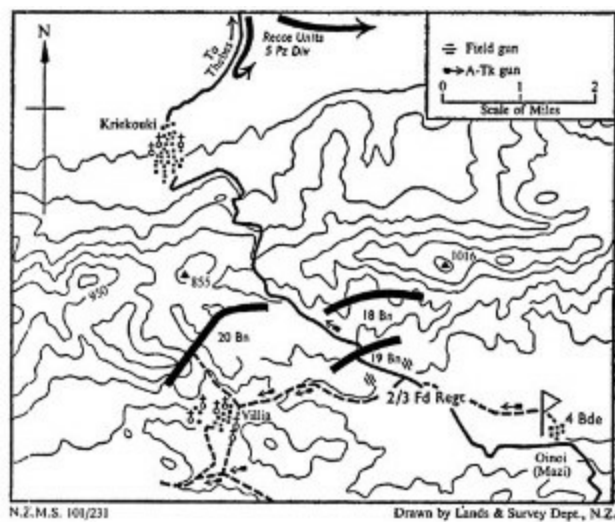
² From *6 Mountain Division*.

country to the east, it would seem that *XVIII Corps* had disregarded its orders ¹ from General Stumme and was determined to have one of its own units make the first entry into the historic city.

¹ See pp. 417, 439.

Withdrawal of 4 Brigade from Kriekouki on night 26-27 April

The main rearguard for **W Force** after the withdrawal from **Thermopylae** had been 4 New Zealand Brigade. Eighteenth and 20th Battalions had moved ² back from **Molos** to the olive groves near **Thebes** during the night of 22–23 April. Nineteenth Battalion, which had been sent to **Levadhia** on 22 April, had been recalled and, although left with no extra transport, had by long marches and the relaying of unit transport reached the brigade area. Next day the battalions withdrew some seven miles south of **Thebes**.



4 BRIGADE REARGUARD IN THE KRIEKOUKI PASS, 26 APRIL 1941

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From the ridges above the village of **Kriekouki**, as it was generally known to the brigade, the force now covered the pass of Kithairon. Whoever held this gap controlled the highway from **Thebes** to **Athens**. The defile itself, narrow and rocky, had some useful cover in the scrub and under the scattered pine trees. The crest of the

² See p. 376.

3000-foot ridge was wide and undulating, but the observation points were excellent and there were good positions for troops and guns, especially if camouflage nets were used. The northern slopes were steep and devoid of cover, but to the south about the villages of Kaza and Villia there were young pine trees, a few olive groves and some dense undergrowth in which well-disciplined troops could remain unseen.

The chances of immediate encirclement were not great. By following the road through **Thebes** towards the east coast the Germans could possibly outflank the brigade, but the country was not easily negotiable by tanks and still farther east at **Khalkis**, Skhimatarion and Tatoi there were the detachments from 1 Armoured Brigade. On the western flank the first two miles of country were almost certainly tank proof; there was a track through Villia to **Kriekouki** but it was steep and easily

covered; and beyond that there were five miles of rough hill country and then the shores of the Gulf of **Corinth**.

To hold the pass there was 4 Brigade Group, a mixed force, with the Australians providing, in addition to artillery and anti-tank guns, 2/8 Field Company, 2/1 Field Ambulance and twelve men from the Australian Corps Signals. Eighteenth Battalion on the right flank and 20 Battalion on the left flank, each with a two-mile front and each supported by machine-gunners from D Company 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion, formed the line, with 19 Battalion in reserve. The Bren carriers from 20 Battalion patrolled beyond the left flank while the carriers from the other battalions, with two platoons from 1 Machine Gun Company, were detailed to resist parachute attacks or encircling movements about either flank. In support of each forward battalion there was a battery from 2/3 Australian Field Regiment, with the most advanced troop in a good position for anti-tank defence. The seven two-pounders of 3 Australian Anti-Tank Battery covered all entrances to the position and seven Bredas from 106 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, Royal Artillery, were well forward, four covering the gun positions and three in a dual anti-tank and anti-aircraft role.

All units were in position by the morning of 24 April and every effort was made to prevent the enemy discovering the presence of such a large force. In daylight the majority of the troops were to the rear of the forward slopes, under cover but ready to move at short notice; after dark they occupied the forward slopes and patrolled actively. Strong formations of enemy aircraft passed over the area on several occasions to and from the **Corinth Canal** area but no anti-aircraft fire was permitted. There was also complete wireless silence, Force and Corps Headquarters both being asked not to call the brigade over the air, except in an emergency. As a result the defences were almost certainly not located by the enemy, whose records for this period, though not specific on the subject, all suggest that no serious resistance was expected. The British troops had apparently withdrawn to the **Peloponnese**.

That night 6 New Zealand and 19 Australian Brigades and Clifton Force, the rearguard, came through from the **Thermopylae** area. Next day, 25 April, the enemy, delayed by demolitions south of **Thermopylae**, was still far from **Thebes**; observation aircraft came over but there were no attacks by the fighter-bomber squadrons. Fourth Brigade was therefore able to adjust its defences, **General Freyberg** having decided that 6 Brigade, ¹ instead of taking over the right flank, must leave that night for the **Peloponnese**. Thereafter the high ground on the right flank north of Tatoi was the responsibility of 1 Armoured Brigade. To reinforce it A Squadron New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** and C Company **1 Rangers** withdrew from the **Khalkis** area and that night the rest of the **Divisional Cavalry**, less C Squadron at **Corinth**, moved over with one battery of **2 Royal Horse Artillery**, 34 New Zealand Anti-Tank Battery, 4 New Zealand Machine Gun Company and two troops of 102 Anti-Tank Regiment.

In the afternoon Brigadier Puttick had been ordered ² to postpone the withdrawal another twenty-four hours, actually until after dark on 26–27 April when, instead of embarking from **Megara** beach, his brigade would withdraw south of the **Corinth Canal**. He would be responsible for all demolitions up to and including the canal bridge; and once there his battalions had to be prepared to hold the area against any attacks from the north. These decisions made, Battle Headquarters New Zealand Division left **Mazi** at dusk for the **Miloi** area, south of the **Corinth Canal** and immediately west of **Navplion**.

On 26 April, after the screening detachments had moved out on the flanks, the troops patiently prepared for another day of concealment. After 7 a.m., however, there were explosions in **Thebes**; at 10 a.m. the long-expected and apparently endless line of trucks could be seen approaching the town; and then, about 11 a.m., a column of about 100 vehicles led by motor-cyclists and a light tank moved south towards the pass. Closely spaced and in open country the trucks were an excellent target and 2/3 Field Regiment waited until they were within range. As the guns had not registered the shells seemed, at first, to fall everywhere but on the road. All the same the column stopped, the troops scattered

and

¹ See pp. 407– 8.

² See p. 406.

there was some confusion, but before long they had re-embussed and were hurrying back to **Thebes**, leaving eight vehicles burning on the highway.

Thereafter the Germans made no effort to force the pass. Some artillery came forward to engage 2/3 Field Regiment but the shelling was neither heavy nor systematic. The Australians, on the other hand, continued to be aggressive, firing freely at any Germans probing south from **Thebes** and ending the afternoon with a registration shoot over a wide area to give the impression that fresh batteries had arrived.

In other ways, however, the enemy had been very active. His army intelligence authorities were now certain that at least two New Zealand battalions with strong artillery support were holding the area. Reconnaissance aircraft had been taking off from a landing ground near **Thebes** and fighter-bombers had been attacking any vehicles moving along the road to **Athens**. About 7 p.m. the observers of 18 Battalion reported that at least 200 German vehicles were about Likouresi, a village about ten miles east of **Thebes**. This suggested that an effort would be made to by-pass the defences at **Kriekouki**.

The other and more important problem for Brigadier Puttick had been the activity of the *Luftwaffe* about **Corinth** and the appearance of paratroopers between there and **Megara**. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Marnham and Captain Baker, who had appeared ¹ from **Megara** about 2 p.m., medical personnel had come back saying that there were paratroopers along the road to **Corinth**, transport vehicles which should have returned to **Megara** had not appeared and the constant bombing in the canal area suggested that the bridge or its approaches might be

wrecked. As the brigade was to withdraw over the canal that night this report was very disturbing, but Puttick, who knew the area, remained confident and sent the two officers back to investigate the position still further. Nevertheless, he stoutly prepared for the worst and made his plans for a new defence area about nine miles east of the canal. It would be held during 27 April, and if the **Navy** could not arrange an embarkation the force would have to force its way over the canal. Should that not be possible the brigade would fight it out near the beach in the hope of possible embarkation.

About 6 p.m. more information was received. Paratroops had definitely landed, and to confirm that fact Marnham and Baker returned after being captured by and then escaping ² from a small force near **Megara**. But there was still no definite information about the canal bridge and Puttick was preparing to put his new plans

¹ See p. 410.

² See p. 411.

into operation when, at 6.30 p.m., an officer came over from 1 Armoured Brigade with the wireless message ¹ from **Freyberg** ordering 4 Brigade to withdraw through **Athens** to the **Porto Rafti** beaches. Embarkation might possibly be that very night, 26–27 April.

Action was taken immediately. Marnham and Baker were sent with four carriers along the **Corinth** road to report upon the situation and to pick up any men left about **Megara**. To support them and to prevent any German interference with the withdrawal of 4 Brigade, two infantry platoons and five Bren carriers were sent to a position just west of the **Elevisis** road junction. The route through **Athens** was picketed and an advance party was sent to **Porto Rafti**. All units were told that the timings for the withdrawal that night would stand, but that instead of crossing the canal they would assemble near **Porto Rafti**.

The withdrawal began at 9 p.m. and proceeded very smoothly, with no stragglers and no interference from the enemy. The men came in past the check point, marched to the transport area and climbed aboard the vehicles of B Section 4 RMT Company. The convoy, with lights on, raced back through **Athens** and east towards **Porto Rafti**. The rearguard followed under the command of **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger**, with 2/8 Australian Field Company blowing a series of demolitions in the stretch between the pass and **Elevisis**.

Thereafter the withdrawal towards **Porto Rafti** continued without any interruption. The groups from **Megara** were collected, the carrier force sent to cover the western approaches came back without any opposition from the parachute units, and the machine-gunners at the four road blocks ² arranged by Brigadier Miles were picked up by the rearguard as it came through.

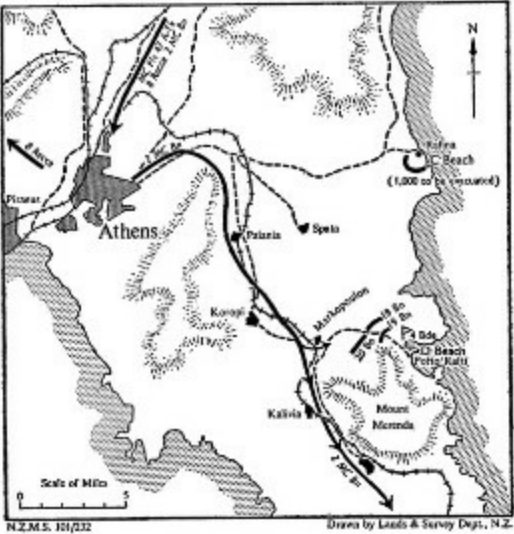
At daylight on 27 April the brigade group was under cover of the olive trees which flourish on the small plain to the north-west of **Markopoulon**. Running southwards was the highway to Lavrion; branching eastwards was the road across the foothills and down the fertile valley to the beaches of **Porto Rafti**. Movement there that night, 27–28 April, would not be difficult; the problem for Brigadier Puttick was the safety of his brigade during the next twelve hours.

The change of embarkation beach only two and a half hours before the withdrawal commenced and the possibility of evacuation that night, 26–27 April, had prevented the preparation of any defence scheme. The embarkation staff, thinking of concealment and ease of embarkation, had dispersed the battalions along some 15 miles of road in no tactical formation whatsoever. As the

¹ See pp. 424– 5.

² See p. 428.

advanced guard of the German force which had swung south-east from **Thebes** could be expected at any moment, **Puttick** had therefore to organise his defences in open daylight.



4 BRIGADE POSITIONS, PORTO RAFTI, 27 APRIL 1941

The brigade would go into position east of **Markopoulon** and astride the road to **Porto Rafti**. Eighteenth Battalion would hold the undulating country to the north of the road, 20 Battalion the ridge running south-eastwards from the white-walled chapel behind the village. This would give each unit a front of 5000 yards. Nineteenth Battalion (less one company at **Corinth**), 2/8 Field Company and three machine-gun platoons would be in reserve astride the road about a mile from the beach. Two machine-gun platoons supported each of the forward battalions; three guns from 3 Anti-Tank Battery supported 18 Battalion and the four others supported 20 Battalion. The 2/3 Field Regiment had one troop with each forward battalion in an anti-tank role and the rest of its seventeen guns farther back to cover the whole front.

About 9 a.m. the Brigadier, disregarding the policy of concealment hitherto in force, ordered the immediate occupation of these positions. The troops had enjoyed a quiet breakfast, but the pleasant Sunday morning with the Greeks preparing for devotions or offering their simple hospitality now became one of intense activity. All went smoothly until about 11 a.m., when some twenty aircraft made a sudden and very

destructive attack. Machine-gun fire exploded a 25-pound shell, which in its turn produced other explosions until trucks, fields and pine plantations were ablaze. 'Nine guns of the 2/3rd [Field Regiment] or the anti-tank battery attached to it were destroyed, and six artillerymen ... killed'¹ More serious still was the damage to 20 Battalion. Caught in the narrow valley when the aircraft began their attack, B Company had some twenty casualties, including two officers. Eighteenth Battalion had a small number of casualties and lost some vehicles. Nevertheless by 1 p.m. units were in position and able to give more attention to concealment.

¹ Long, p. 176.

The Germans enter Athens; 12 Army issues Further Orders

The reconnaissance units of *XVIII* and *XXXX Corps* had meanwhile been hastening southwards. At a demolition south of Malakasa they were held up until it was partially repaired, but the motorcyclists had then, very unsportingly, raced ahead, leaving the armoured car groups to complete the task. The motor-cycle platoon of *47 Anti-Tank Unit* and elements of *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment* entered **Athens** at 8.10 a.m. and hurried to raise the swastika on the **Acropolis**. The two officers then sent an unauthorised telegram to **Hitler** informing him of the capture of the city. Months later the commander of *5 Panzer Division* was still protesting that the work of his unit had been disregarded. As it was, the armoured car group had arrived shortly after the motor-cyclists and the city had been officially surrendered to its commander. The leading elements of *2 MC Battalion* also reached the city, but the commanders of *XXXX Corps* and *5 Panzer Division*, Generals Stumme and Fehn respectively, arrived about the same time and soon sent them out of the city and south-eastwards towards Lavrion.

That afternoon, 27 April, *12 Army* issued further orders and cleared the situation: *XVIII Corps* would occupy **Athens**; the SS 'Adolf Hitler'

Division would move down the west coast of the **Peloponnese** towards **Pirgos**; **XXXX Corps** would despatch the advanced guard of **5 Panzer Division** as fast as possible towards Lavrion and the main body through **Corinth** to **Argos**, **Tripolis**, **Sparta** and **Kalamata**.

The day was therefore notable for the occupation of **Athens** and the brief engagement at **Markopoulon** between the force moving south-east towards Lavrion and 4 New Zealand Brigade waiting to embark that night from **Porto Rafti**. **Fifth Panzer Division** reached **Corinth**, took over the area from the parachute units and constructed a bridge across the eastern end of the canal. Away to the west at Patrai **III Battalion SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division** crossed the Gulf of **Corinth** and captured any detachments from 3 Royal Tank Regiment which had not been able to withdraw with the main body. Assembling two trains and acting on its original orders, the battalion then went to the canal area only to find **5 Panzer Division** already established.

Second Motor Cycle Battalion, the German force detailed to occupy Lavrion, left **Athens** at 3 p.m., and when the commander approached **Markopoulon** he was surprised to be told by his advanced party that 'between **Markopoulon** and **Porto Rafti** there were English troops who were abandoning their vehicles and fleeing on foot towards the coast.' Troops were immediately sent to investigate, but once through the village they came under the accurate fire of 'at least 6 guns, mortars and MGs.' A fighting patrol which was then sent forward reported the strongly held positions between the village and **Porto Rafti**. The German commander, having no artillery, sent his adjutant to ask **XXXX Corps** for a Stuka attack and ordered his own troops not to advance east of the village. Fortunately for 4 Brigade it was then too late for this attack to be arranged and too late when the adjutant returned for the battalion to move forward. The brigade group was therefore able to make its undisturbed withdrawal, a German patrol reporting next morning that all the British troops had gone.

Fourth Brigade embarks at Porto Rafti

As seen by the men of 4 Brigade, the engagement was naturally more tense and more dramatic. About 3.30 p.m. the long German column had come into sight, armoured fighting vehicles had approached the village and the artillery with 4 Brigade had opened up. Some reports say that the guns and mortars dealt with the Germans only when they emerged from the village; other observers saw 'shell after shell land among the homes of the peaceful friendly folk of **Markopoulon**.' ¹ As it was, the Germans made no serious effort to advance beyond the village; their main stream of vehicles was moving south to Lavrion and their more serious offensive was to have been the air attack which did not eventuate.

At last when the light had faded the final stage of the withdrawal began. The field guns were wrecked about 8.45 p.m., the anti-aircraft guns thereafter covering the road from **Markopoulon** and the coastal

¹ D. W. Sinclair, *19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 100.

track from the south. Stage by stage units came through the lines of 19 Battalion; the pinnaces, whaleboats and caiques took the men out to the cruiser **Ajax** and the destroyers **Kingston** and **Kimberley**; 19 Battalion then went aboard and finally the embarkation staff. In all 3840 men ¹ were taken off and landed next morning at **Suda Bay** in **Crete**.

The group at **Rafina**, about 1000 men, had an even more anxious time waiting under cover in the scrub on the south side of the harbour and disturbed by aircraft bombing the abandoned transport about the area. Brigadier Charrington had made plans for some to leave that night in a caique and for the majority to march to **Porto Rafti** to embark with 4 Brigade.

The information was taken across to Puttick's headquarters, probably by Major Oakes ² of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, but when the

Germans approached **Markopoulon** the move from **Rafina** was impossible. The naval officer with the beach staff then arranged for the destroyer **Havock** to be diverted to that port and Oakes returned to warn the group of the change of plans.

Brigadier Charrington and about 600 men had in the meantime set out after dark to march the 15 miles to **Porto Rafti**. On the way they found that the Germans were between them and the port but, fortunately, they met Oakes and the majority of them returned to **Rafina**. There they waited anxiously for the destroyer to appear. About midnight one of the ship's boats, whose crew had been drifting about the bay waiting for the sound of English voices, came up to the beach. The two groups, ³ Charrington's and that from the caique, were then swiftly embarked and taken to **Crete** with 4 Brigade Group from **Porto Rafti**.

¹ With this group were six very fortunate soldiers who had gone to **Kea Island** on the night of 24–25 April (see pp. 403 and 428). Late in crossing the mountains, they had at dusk on 26 April seen the LCT moving away with the main party. Then, returning to Port Nikolo, they had arrived only to find that the destroyer **Nubian** had left. The following afternoon, however, two caiques had appeared, on one of which there were some fifteen New Zealand sappers and a naval crew disguised as Greeks. In it they were taken off and eventually transferred to the destroyer **Kimberley**.

² Maj T. H. E. Oakes, 2 i/c 7 NZ Anti-Tank Regiment, had arrived after a difficult journey during which he lost his vehicle. Other reports state that officers from HQ 1 Armoured Brigade made similar journeys.

³ There were others who had more exhausting and more romantic escapes. Two parties, each of twelve men, under Lieutenant D. B. Patterson and Second-Lieutenant A. F. Harding respectively, set out on the march to **Porto Rafti** but never received the orders to return to **Rafina**. By 1.30 a.m., exhausted and still far from **Porto Rafti**, they had to stop. Patterson remained with the majority of the men while Harding set out

with the others to find the embarkation beach. Meeting four Greeks who offered to row his party there, he sent back two men to advise Patterson and hurried on, reaching the *Ajax* about 2.30 a.m. Her crew could give no assistance, but it was suggested that the *Kingston* might be able to send round a boat to pick up the others. The search in the darkness for this ship so exhausted the Greeks that Harding with his party had eventually to go aboard the *Ajax*. Patterson and about twenty men, soon realising that they were left to their own resources, acquired a 40-foot caique and sailed away, picking up off shore Captain G. M. Beaumont of 5 Field Regiment, who had decided to make his own way in a rowing boat. They called at Kithnos, Serifos, and Sifnos, met Lieutenant Kelsall and his party at Milos (see p. 420) and eventually reached *Suda Bay in Crete*.

The Withdrawal of 6 Brigade to Monemvasia, 27-28 April

On 27 April, when 4 Brigade was waiting to embark from Porto Rafti, 6 Brigade was in the *Tripolis* area preparing to move south that night to *Monemvasia*. As the troops had by then learnt the value of concealment they suffered little from air attacks. Those who took the greatest risks were the staff and reconnaissance parties moving south to the embarkation area. *General Freyberg* visited Brigade Headquarters and it was decided that there should be one long night withdrawal, a distance of over 100 miles across several mountain ranges with tortuously winding roads. The instructions were then issued, but it was suddenly decided that 26 Battalion should move that day, leaving the road relatively clear for the other battalions.

About midday the companies were strung out along the highway and enemy aircraft were soon active. However, a working party went ahead to fill in bomb craters, orders about dispersal were strictly enforced and the Divisional Supply Column drivers maintained a high average speed, driving south-east across the plain and over the mountains to the *Sparta* area, one of the loveliest in *Greece*. Away to the west was the blue wall of the Taygetus Range overshadowing the orange and mulberry groves, the oleanders and cypresses, and the fields of gladioli, hyacinths and

asphodels. The road continued southwards over the hills, passing one village after another, each with its flock of sheep, its pigs, its goats and its fowls, its olive trees and its dark-green orange grove. Finally, instead of continuing south to **Yithion**, the port of **Sparta**, they turned south-eastwards to the small plain about **Molaoi**, about 15 miles from the evacuation beaches at **Monemvasia**.

The withdrawal that night of 24 and 25 Battalions was not delayed by the approach of any German force. The Divisional Supply Column moved forward up the narrow, winding one-way road to the defences on the northern hills. After turning round at the crest of the pass—no other suitable point could be found—the Column collected 25 Battalion and hastened south through **Tripolis**. The companies of 24 Battalion, already embussed and waiting in the centre of the town, then moved off, the drivers concentrated on their task and by morning, after the fastest night move of the campaign, the battalions were safely under cover near **Molaoi**. Fourth Field Ambulance, which had left about 8.30 p.m., was already there with the thirty-seven wounded, some of them from the Greek hospital in **Tripolis**.

Embarkation Successes and Disappointments, Night 27-28 April

For other units in **Greece** the night of 27–28 April had probably been more tense than it had been for 6 Brigade. Fourth Brigade at **Porto Rafti** and the mixed group at **Rafina**, though in contact with the assembling German forces, had been left to embark undisturbed. But for those waiting on the beaches at **Tolos** and **Kalamata** there were only hours of disappointment.

In the **Tolos–Navplion** area 1500 men had been left ¹ behind on the night of 26–27 April. Many were stragglers, but there were 200 men from 3 Royal Tank Regiment who had become detached from the main body and 150 from the ‘Australian Composite Battalion’ who had been sent back from Tripolis Pass to cover the embarkation. They now provided a rearguard covering the beach at **Tolos**, where the others in four columns waited for the destroyers which never appeared. At 3 a.m. they dispersed,

efforts were made to collect boats or caiques, and officers were told by Colonel J. H. Courage that they and their men could take to the hills or escape by boat. The small force from the Australian battalion attempted to hold the beach but by the late afternoon, 28 April, it had been overwhelmed. ²

At **Monemvasia** there was as yet no embarkation staff. The only group at the little port was that of Colonels Quilliam and Blunt who had been acquiring local caiques for future evacuation. They left that night for Kithira Island, ³ where they set about organising the evacuation of the several hundred men who had missed the other embarkations.

Farther south at **Kalamata** ships had been expected and some 7000 men, including the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion, had assembled ⁴ on the beach. But the **Navy** did not arrive. Some units kept their formation and returned to their particular areas but others broke up, the men seeking cover in the extensive olive groves between the town and eastern mountains.

¹ See pp. 428– 9.

² The confusion which developed in the **Navplion- Tolos** area during 28 April was intensified by several air attacks and finally by the approach of detachments from *5 Panzer Division*. Even so, many parties escaped, some finding boats along the beach, others hastening south until they found seaworthy caiques. Among them were Lieutenant Staveley and the eight men from 4 Field Regiment who had already escaped by caique from **Volos** to **Khalkis** and had then been sent south to **Argos**. Like several other groups, they left the beach under fire and rowed down the coast to Kiparissi. Here they obtained a caique and went south with some British officers to Cape Malea, where they met other New Zealanders. They then set out for **Crete**, but when their vessel was disabled in a storm they put in to the island of Antikithira. Obtaining another caique and accompanied by some Greeks, they reached, on 4 May, the coast of **Crete** at **Kastelli**, to the west of **Maleme** airfield. All but three or four of the thirty men from the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and 28 (Maori)

Battalion who had come over the hills from the **Corinth Canal** were equally successful. Not being evacuated from **Navplion** on the night of 26–27 April, they had walked the 15 miles to **Tolos**. Then, when it was definite that there would be no evacuation on the night of 27–28 April, they made their own arrangements. One group, European and Maori, led by Captain E. R. Harford and Lieutenant M. P. Studholme, seized an 18-foot boat, crossed the bay and went down the coast, rowing in shifts from island to island and eventually reaching **Crete** in a Greek fishing boat. Another group had hired a caique and was about to leave the bay when a German patrol boat appeared. The caique was sunk but Lieutenant I. L. Bonifant and others took to the hills, joined up with British and Greek troops, and about ten days later slipped away in another caique to Kithira and thence to **Crete**.

³ See p. 446.

⁴ See p. 451.

The Embarkation of 6 Brigade from Monemvasia, 28-29 April

The following day, 28 April, 6 Brigade remained in its dispersal area between the villages of Sikea and **Molaoi** on the small plain about 15 miles west of **Monemvasia**. Aircraft were often over the area but the troops sheltering in the magnificent olive groves remained undiscovered. Along the coast it was different. Reconnaissance aircraft appeared early that morning and dive-bombers were soon attacking an LCT which had left **Navplion** on the night of 26–27 April with 600 Australians. Laid up and unseen during daylight it had, on the night of 27–28 April, been taken south to **Monemvasia**. There the Australians had disembarked, but the LCT when moving out to a more secluded beach had been observed. She was soon on fire. The embarkation of 6 Brigade had thus become more difficult, the LCAs scattered about the nearby beaches being as yet the only available small craft.

Another problem was that of defence should the Germans come through from the **Corinth Canal** area. There was no artillery or

supporting weapons and only a limited supply of small-arms ammunition. The mountain roads were ideal for demolition but the few engineers in the **Peloponnese** had limited supplies of explosives. On 26 April, before the move south from **Miloi**, Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton's demolition party had been very small—a few men from 6 Field Company and six troopers from C Squadron Divisional Cavalry, all survivors from the parachute attacks about the Canal— and his equipment had been two pounds of gelnite, some fuses and some detonators. As the only answer was to use depth-charges, he had consulted the naval officers with Headquarters **W Force** before they left that night for **Crete**. The naval tender at **Miloi** supplied one charge and three more were afterwards obtained from a grounded Greek destroyer at **Monemvasia**.

With these slight resources the brigade group prepared to cover its embarkation on the night of 28–29 April. Using the depth-charges, the engineers demolished a bridge some 16 miles out from **Monemvasia**. Brigadier Lee then posted Captain K. A. Carroll with his two platoons from 2/6 Australian Battalion to cover the demolition. About four miles to the south 24 and 25 Battalions were under cover, with the officers reconnoitring the ground and the men enjoying a much-needed rest. The Germans seem to have had no idea that the brigade had turned off to **Monemvasia**; they must have decided that the force had followed the other British units to **Kalamata**. Beyond them again and astride the road was an improvised detachment under Major Petrie, ¹ 18 Battalion, consisting of stragglers from different units and part of **Lee Force**. Then, some four miles from the other battalions and eight miles from the beach, were 26 Battalion, 4 Field Ambulance and Brigade Headquarters. Strung out along the road from there to the beach were the odds and ends from British and Australian units and finally, in a valley near the harbour, Divisional Headquarters.

The scenery which the majority of the brigade did not see to appreciate when they embarked that night was magnificent. **Monemvasia**, 'the Gibraltar of **Greece**', was really a peninsula with open roadsteads to the north and south. On its flat crest above the cliffs some

900 feet high a town of 30,000 people had once existed, a key point in the Eastern Mediterranean and the distributing centre for Malmsey wine. In 1941 a few people lived in the old buildings on the south side between the rocky coast and the base of the cliffs, but the majority lived on the mainland in a village overlooking the beaches.

The chief anxiety of the day for **General Freyberg**, apart from the threat of a German attack, was the uncertainty about shipping. At daybreak he saw the dive-bombers sink the LCT which would have been so useful as a lighter between the shore and the ships. About midday Admiral Baillie-Grohman came down the coast to say that there was still some uncertainty about the arrival of the convoy. But he had one piece of good news. The LCAs, assault landing craft specially designed for working to and from beaches, would be coming in that night. Nevertheless there was still every chance of an incomplete evacuation. One battalion might have to remain until the following night, and since it was the turn of 24 Battalion to undertake the next rearguard duty, Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth had to select the most favourable position for a last stand. During the afternoon, however, several small boats and a Greek caique were made available. Each battalion supplied men accustomed to handling boats and Second-Lieutenant **Andrews**,² **Divisional Signals**, organised a supplementary ferry service from the beach to the caique and thence to the vessels of the convoy. As a result of their labours it was eventually possible for 24 Battalion to embark that night.

The arrangements for embarkation were most carefully prepared by Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry and other members of the divisional staff and once darkness fell the move to the beaches began. Fourth

¹ Major M. De R. Petrie; **Wellington**; born **Christchurch**, 9 Aug 1895; company secretary; 2 i/c **18 Bn** 1940–41.

² **Maj A. A. Andrews**; Wainui, Banks Peninsula; born Fairlie, 28 Sep 1909; civil servant; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

Field Ambulance and the wounded left first, then 26 Battalion, Brigade Headquarters, 25 Battalion and finally 24 Battalion. As each unit approached the port the men wrecked their vehicles and marched down to join the waiting columns.

About 9 p.m. the first troops arrived and looked anxiously for the ships. 'I feel sure that those last hours of waiting on the beach were the most anxious that we had had.'¹ The evacuation might be incomplete or, worse still, it might not take place at all. Baillie-Grohman had no confirmation that the ships were arriving, he did not know if they would be transports or naval vessels, and, moreover, he did not know if his signal about the actual embarkation point in the large bay had ever been received. To prevent any misunderstanding he sent an officer in an LCA to move beyond the bay. There he found the cruiser and the four destroyers; they were actually on their way in to **Monemvasia.**

The embarkation which began at 11.50 p.m. was mainly from the two piers and the causeway connecting **Monemvasia with the mainland. The cruiser **Ajax** and the destroyers **Havock**, **Hotspur**, **Griffin** and **Isis** closed well in and the whole embarkation was then 'remarkably well carried out.'²**

The only delay was in the embarkation of the wounded. They had been sent off first, but the boats had returned with them because only destroyers were then in the bay and they could not accommodate wounded men. The **Ajax which had yet to appear would take them all. In the meantime they had to remain on the pier with the anxious controlling staff regretting the delay. However, as more ships and landing craft drew in the speed of embarkation increased. The **Ajax** approached and the lines of stretcher cases were taken aboard, the columns grew shorter and it became certain that the whole force would be embarked. At 3 a.m. in the last boatload **General Freyberg** and Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman, Brigadiers Galloway, Barrowclough and Lee, with Battle Headquarters, set out for the **Ajax**. And at eight o'clock next morning, 29 April, the convoy with some 4320 all ranks aboard arrived**

at **Suda Bay**.

The same night the destroyers *Auckland*, *Salvia* and *Hyacinth* had gone to Kithira Island and taken off 60 soldiers, 700 Royal Air Force personnel ³ and 60 Greek soldiers.

The troops of these two convoys were not landed in **Crete**. In the original plan all units were to have been taken from **Greece** to **Egypt**; the movement to **Crete** of many formations, including 4 and 5 New Zealand Brigades, had only been an effort to hasten

¹ GOC's report.

² Cunningham's despatch, Enclosure I, para. 47.

³ See pp. 443, 450.

the turn-round of the ships. Moreover, Admiral Cunningham was extremely anxious to evacuate from **Crete** as many troops as possible before there was any serious interference from the enemy. Baillie-Grohman had therefore arranged for a convoy with a strong escort to leave **Suda Bay** that same morning for **Alexandria**. Seven transports were already assembled when the warships steamed in from **Monemvasia** and Kithira Island, so the troops in the destroyers and some from the *Ajax* were immediately transferred to the *Thurland Castle* and *Comliebank*. In the other transports there already were the consular staff and British subjects from **Greece**, **Royal Air Force** personnel and British seamen, walking wounded and nurses, including the New Zealand group who had been in **Crete** since 25 April. At 11 a.m. the convoy sailed, and all of 6 Brigade who had embarked at **Monemvasia** reached **Alexandria** on 1 May.

General Freyberg and his senior staff officers, Stewart and Gentry, had remained, the General wishing to spend the night in **Crete** before flying to **Egypt** the following day in a **Sunderland**. That evening,

however, his departure was cancelled. Next morning, 30 April, Wavell, who had just arrived from **Cairo**, placed him in command of the forces in **Crete**, the majority of whom were the British, Australian and New Zealand formations evacuated from **Greece**.

TO GREECE

THE GERMAN ADVANCE FROM THERMOPYLAE

The German Advance from Thermopylae

AT 2.30 a.m. on 25 April the advanced guard of the German forces had entered **Molos** soon after 6 New Zealand Brigade Group had left the **Thermopylae** line. Units from *Baacke Group* hastened along the coast road, reaching **Atalandi** by midday and then continuing either along the coast or inland to **Levadhia**, where they were halted by a demolished bridge.

Next day, 26 April, there were clear-cut orders from General Stumme. ¹ *Fifth Panzer Division* was to advance beyond **Thebes**, the main body approaching **Corinth** and a small force entering **Athens** and the ports of **Piræus**, Lavrion and **Marathon**. Units of *XVIII Corps* were to occupy the country north of **Athens** and east of Amfiklia; away to the west elements of *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division* were to advance to the Gulf of **Corinth**, cross to Patrai and enter **Corinth** from the west.

The forward elements of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*, a unit of *XXXX Corps*, thereupon advanced beyond **Thebes** and came under fire from 4 New Zealand Brigade Group at **Kriekouki**. The artillery with this reconnaissance force then went into action but no immediate attempt was made to approach **Athens** by this route. The main body of *I/31 Panzer Regiment* turned eastwards along the **Khalkis** road to the Spaidhes area, beyond which there was no further movement by tanks. But *8 Reconnaissance Unit* and the motor-cycle platoon of *47 Anti-Tank Unit*, ² using armoured cars, continued southwards and by nightfall were at and even beyond Malakasa, a village east of **Thebes** and north of **Athens**. In the same area there were *2 Motor Cycle Battalion* and elements of *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment*. After landing on the northern shores of Euboea they had moved south to **Khalkis** and returned to the mainland by boat or across the bridge, which they had repaired late that afternoon. As they had orders to approach **Athens** and

not the

¹ Commander of *XXXX Corps* and, temporarily, of *XVIII Corps*. See p. 417.

² From *6 Mountain Division*.

country to the east, it would seem that *XVIII Corps* had disregarded its orders ¹ from General Stumme and was determined to have one of its own units make the first entry into the historic city.

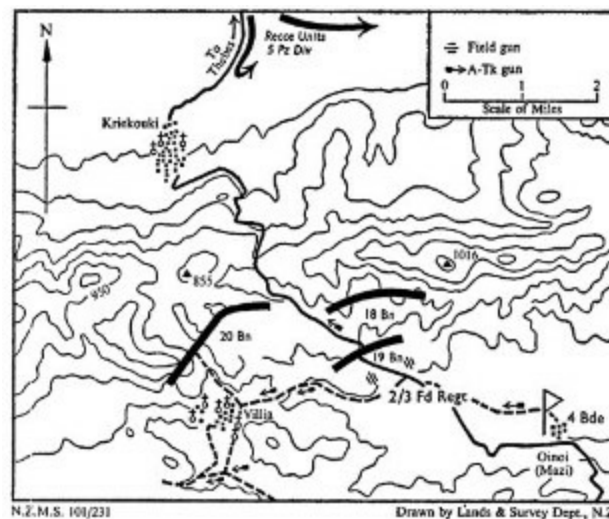
¹ See pp. 417, 439.

TO GREECE

WITHDRAWAL OF 4 BRIGADE FROM KRIEKOUKI ON NIGHT 26-27 APRIL

Withdrawal of 4 Brigade from Kriekouki on night 26-27 April

The main rearguard for **W Force** after the withdrawal from **Thermopylae** had been **4 New Zealand Brigade**. **Eighteenth and 20th Battalions** had moved ² back from **Molos** to the olive groves near **Thebes** during the night of 22–23 April. **Nineteenth Battalion**, which had been sent to **Levadhia** on 22 April, had been recalled and, although left with no extra transport, had by long marches and the relaying of unit transport reached the brigade area. Next day the battalions withdrew some seven miles south of **Thebes**.



4 BRIGADE REARGUARD IN THE KRIEKOUKI PASS, 26 APRIL 1941

4 BRIGADE REARGUARD IN THE KRIEKOUKI PASS, 26 APRIL 1941

From the ridges above the village of **Kriekouki**, as it was generally known to the brigade, the force now covered the pass of **Kithairon**. Whoever held this gap controlled the highway from **Thebes** to **Athens**. The defile itself, narrow and rocky, had some useful cover in the scrub and under the scattered pine trees. The crest of the

² See p. 376.

3000-foot ridge was wide and undulating, but the observation points were excellent and there were good positions for troops and guns, especially if camouflage nets were used. The northern slopes were steep and devoid of cover, but to the south about the villages of Kaza and Villia there were young pine trees, a few olive groves and some dense undergrowth in which well-disciplined troops could remain unseen.

The chances of immediate encirclement were not great. By following the road through **Thebes towards the east coast the Germans could possibly outflank the brigade, but the country was not easily negotiable by tanks and still farther east at **Khalkis**, Skhimatarion and Tatoi there were the detachments from 1 Armoured Brigade. On the western flank the first two miles of country were almost certainly tank proof; there was a track through Villia to **Kriekouki** but it was steep and easily covered; and beyond that there were five miles of rough hill country and then the shores of the Gulf of **Corinth**.**

To hold the pass there was 4 Brigade Group, a mixed force, with the Australians providing, in addition to artillery and anti-tank guns, 2/8 Field Company, 2/1 Field Ambulance and twelve men from the Australian Corps Signals. Eighteenth Battalion on the right flank and 20 Battalion on the left flank, each with a two-mile front and each supported by machine-gunners from D Company 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion, formed the line, with 19 Battalion in reserve. The Bren carriers from 20 Battalion patrolled beyond the left flank while the carriers from the other battalions, with two platoons from 1 Machine Gun Company, were detailed to resist parachute attacks or encircling movements about either flank. In support of each forward battalion there was a battery from 2/3 Australian Field Regiment, with the most advanced troop in a good position for anti-tank defence. The seven two-pounders of 3 Australian Anti-Tank Battery covered all entrances to the position and seven Bredas from 106 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, Royal Artillery, were well forward, four covering the gun positions and three in a dual anti-tank and anti-aircraft role.

All units were in position by the morning of 24 April and every effort was made to prevent the enemy discovering the presence of such a large force. In daylight the majority of the troops were to the rear of the forward slopes, under cover but ready to move at short notice; after dark they occupied the forward slopes and patrolled actively. Strong formations of enemy aircraft passed over the area on several occasions to and from the **Corinth Canal** area but no anti-aircraft fire was permitted. There was also complete wireless silence, Force and Corps Headquarters both being asked not to call the brigade over the air, except in an emergency. As a result the defences were almost certainly not located by the enemy, whose records for this period, though not specific on the subject, all suggest that no serious resistance was expected. The British troops had apparently withdrawn to the **Peloponnese**.

That night 6 New Zealand and 19 Australian Brigades and Clifton Force, the rearguard, came through from the **Thermopylae** area. Next day, 25 April, the enemy, delayed by demolitions south of **Thermopylae**, was still far from **Thebes**; observation aircraft came over but there were no attacks by the fighter-bomber squadrons. Fourth Brigade was therefore able to adjust its defences, **General Freyberg** having decided that 6 Brigade, ¹ instead of taking over the right flank, must leave that night for the **Peloponnese**. Thereafter the high ground on the right flank north of Tatoi was the responsibility of 1 Armoured Brigade. To reinforce it A Squadron New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** and C Company **1 Rangers** withdrew from the **Khalkis** area and that night the rest of the Divisional Cavalry, less C Squadron at **Corinth**, moved over with one battery of **2 Royal Horse Artillery**, 34 New Zealand Anti-Tank Battery, 4 New Zealand Machine Gun Company and two troops of 102 Anti-Tank Regiment.

In the afternoon Brigadier Puttick had been ordered ² to postpone the withdrawal another twenty-four hours, actually until after dark on 26–27 April when, instead of embarking from **Megara** beach, his brigade would withdraw south of the **Corinth Canal**. He would be responsible for all demolitions up to and including the canal bridge; and once there his

battalions had to be prepared to hold the area against any attacks from the north. These decisions made, Battle Headquarters New Zealand Division left **Mazi** at dusk for the **Miloi** area, south of the **Corinth Canal** and immediately west of **Navplion**.

On 26 April, after the screening detachments had moved out on the flanks, the troops patiently prepared for another day of concealment. After 7 a.m., however, there were explosions in **Thebes**; at 10 a.m. the long-expected and apparently endless line of trucks could be seen approaching the town; and then, about 11 a.m., a column of about 100 vehicles led by motor-cyclists and a light tank moved south towards the pass. Closely spaced and in open country the trucks were an excellent target and 2/3 Field Regiment waited until they were within range. As the guns had not registered the shells seemed, at first, to fall everywhere but on the road. All the same the column stopped, the troops scattered and

¹ See pp. 407– 8.

² See p. 406.

there was some confusion, but before long they had re-embussed and were hurrying back to **Thebes**, leaving eight vehicles burning on the highway.

Thereafter the Germans made no effort to force the pass. Some artillery came forward to engage 2/3 Field Regiment but the shelling was neither heavy nor systematic. The Australians, on the other hand, continued to be aggressive, firing freely at any Germans probing south from **Thebes** and ending the afternoon with a registration shoot over a wide area to give the impression that fresh batteries had arrived.

In other ways, however, the enemy had been very active. His army intelligence authorities were now certain that at least two New Zealand battalions with strong artillery support were holding the area.

Reconnaissance aircraft had been taking off from a landing ground near **Thebes** and fighter-bombers had been attacking any vehicles moving along the road to **Athens**. About 7 p.m. the observers of 18 Battalion reported that at least 200 German vehicles were about Likouresi, a village about ten miles east of **Thebes**. This suggested that an effort would be made to by-pass the defences at **Kriekouki**.

The other and more important problem for Brigadier Puttick had been the activity of the *Luftwaffe* about **Corinth** and the appearance of paratroopers between there and **Megara**. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Marnham and Captain Baker, who had appeared ¹ from **Megara** about 2 p.m., medical personnel had come back saying that there were paratroopers along the road to **Corinth**, transport vehicles which should have returned to **Megara** had not appeared and the constant bombing in the canal area suggested that the bridge or its approaches might be wrecked. As the brigade was to withdraw over the canal that night this report was very disturbing, but Puttick, who knew the area, remained confident and sent the two officers back to investigate the position still further. Nevertheless, he stoutly prepared for the worst and made his plans for a new defence area about nine miles east of the canal. It would be held during 27 April, and if the **Navy** could not arrange an embarkation the force would have to force its way over the canal. Should that not be possible the brigade would fight it out near the beach in the hope of possible embarkation.

About 6 p.m. more information was received. Paratroops had definitely landed, and to confirm that fact Marnham and Baker returned after being captured by and then escaping ² from a small force near **Megara**. But there was still no definite information about the canal bridge and Puttick was preparing to put his new plans

¹ See p. 410.

² See p. 411.

into operation when, at 6.30 p.m., an officer came over from 1 Armoured Brigade with the wireless message ¹ from Freyberg ordering 4 Brigade to withdraw through Athens to the Porto Rafti beaches. Embarkation might possibly be that very night, 26–27 April.

Action was taken immediately. Marnham and Baker were sent with four carriers along the Corinth road to report upon the situation and to pick up any men left about Megara. To support them and to prevent any German interference with the withdrawal of 4 Brigade, two infantry platoons and five Bren carriers were sent to a position just west of the Eleusis road junction. The route through Athens was picketed and an advance party was sent to Porto Rafti. All units were told that the timings for the withdrawal that night would stand, but that instead of crossing the canal they would assemble near Porto Rafti.

The withdrawal began at 9 p.m. and proceeded very smoothly, with no stragglers and no interference from the enemy. The men came in past the check point, marched to the transport area and climbed aboard the vehicles of B Section 4 RMT Company. The convoy, with lights on, raced back through Athens and east towards Porto Rafti. The rearguard followed under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger, with 2/8 Australian Field Company blowing a series of demolitions in the stretch between the pass and Eleusis.

Thereafter the withdrawal towards Porto Rafti continued without any interruption. The groups from Megara were collected, the carrier force sent to cover the western approaches came back without any opposition from the parachute units, and the machine-gunners at the four road blocks ² arranged by Brigadier Miles were picked up by the rearguard as it came through.

At daylight on 27 April the brigade group was under cover of the olive trees which flourish on the small plain to the north-west of Markopoulon. Running southwards was the highway to Lavrion; branching eastwards was the road across the foothills and down the fertile valley to the beaches of Porto Rafti. Movement there that night,

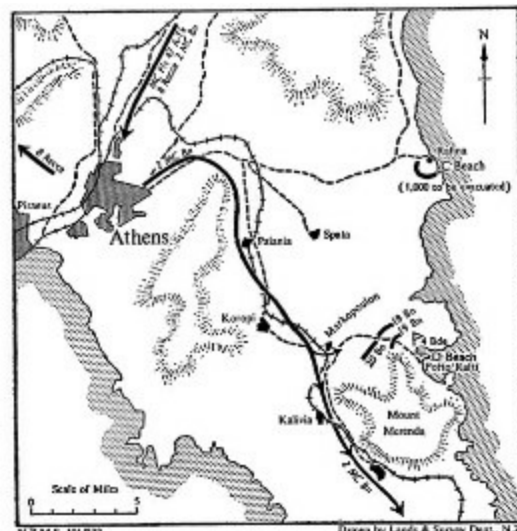
27–28 April, would not be difficult; the problem for Brigadier Puttick was the safety of his brigade during the next twelve hours.

The change of embarkation beach only two and a half hours before the withdrawal commenced and the possibility of evacuation that night, 26–27 April, had prevented the preparation of any defence scheme. The embarkation staff, thinking of concealment and ease of embarkation, had dispersed the battalions along some 15 miles of road in no tactical formation whatsoever. As the

¹ See pp. 424– 5.

² See p. 428.

advanced guard of the German force which had swung south-east from **Thebes** could be expected at any moment, Puttick had therefore to organise his defences in open daylight.



4 BRIGADE POSITIONS, PORTO RAFTI, 27 APRIL 1941

The brigade would go into position east of **Markopoulon** and astride the road to **Porto Rafti**. Eighteenth Battalion would hold the undulating country to the north of the road, 20 Battalion the ridge running south-eastwards from the white-walled chapel behind the village. This would

give each unit a front of 5000 yards. Nineteenth Battalion (less one company at **Corinth**), 2/8 Field Company and three machine-gun platoons would be in reserve astride the road about a mile from the beach. Two machine-gun platoons supported each of the forward battalions; three guns from 3 Anti-Tank Battery supported 18 Battalion and the four others supported 20 Battalion. The 2/3 Field Regiment had one troop with each forward battalion in an anti-tank role and the rest of its seventeen guns farther back to cover the whole front.

About 9 a.m. the Brigadier, disregarding the policy of concealment hitherto in force, ordered the immediate occupation of these positions. The troops had enjoyed a quiet breakfast, but the pleasant Sunday morning with the Greeks preparing for devotions or offering their simple hospitality now became one of intense activity. All went smoothly until about 11 a.m., when some twenty aircraft made a sudden and very destructive attack. Machine-gun fire exploded a 25-pound shell, which in its turn produced other explosions until trucks, fields and pine plantations were ablaze. 'Nine guns of the 2/3rd [Field Regiment] or the anti-tank battery attached to it were destroyed, and six artillerymen ... killed'¹ More serious still was the damage to 20 Battalion. Caught in the narrow valley when the aircraft began their attack, B Company had some twenty casualties, including two officers. Eighteenth Battalion had a small number of casualties and lost some vehicles. Nevertheless by 1 p.m. units were in position and able to give more attention to concealment.

¹ Long, p. 176.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS ENTER ATHENS; 12 ARMY ISSUES FURTHER ORDERS

The Germans enter Athens; 12 Army issues Further Orders

The reconnaissance units of *XVIII* and *XXXX Corps* had meanwhile been hastening southwards. At a demolition south of Malakasa they were held up until it was partially repaired, but the motorcyclists had then, very unsportingly, raced ahead, leaving the armoured car groups to complete the task. The motor-cycle platoon of *47 Anti-Tank Unit* and elements of *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment* entered **Athens** at 8.10 a.m. and hurried to raise the swastika on the **Acropolis**. The two officers then sent an unauthorised telegram to **Hitler** informing him of the capture of the city. Months later the commander of *5 Panzer Division* was still protesting that the work of his unit had been disregarded. As it was, the armoured car group had arrived shortly after the motor-cyclists and the city had been officially surrendered to its commander. The leading elements of *2 MC Battalion* also reached the city, but the commanders of *XXXX Corps* and *5 Panzer Division*, Generals Stumme and Fehn respectively, arrived about the same time and soon sent them out of the city and south-eastwards towards Lavrion.

That afternoon, 27 April, *12 Army* issued further orders and cleared the situation: *XVIII Corps* would occupy **Athens**; the SS '*Adolf Hitler*' *Division* would move down the west coast of the **Peloponnese** towards **Pirgos**; *XXXX Corps* would despatch the advanced guard of *5 Panzer Division* as fast as possible towards Lavrion and the main body through **Corinth** to **Argos**, **Tripolis**, **Sparta** and **Kalamata**.

The day was therefore notable for the occupation of **Athens** and the brief engagement at **Markopoulon** between the force moving south-east towards Lavrion and 4 New Zealand Brigade waiting to embark that night from **Porto Rafti**. *Fifth Panzer Division* reached **Corinth**, took over the area from the parachute units and constructed a bridge across the eastern end of the canal. Away to the west at Patrai *III Battalion SS*

'Adolf Hitler' Division crossed the Gulf of **Corinth** and captured any detachments from **3 Royal Tank Regiment** which had not been able to withdraw with the main body. Assembling two trains and acting on its original orders, the battalion then went to the canal area only to find **5 Panzer Division** already established.

Second Motor Cycle Battalion, the German force detailed to occupy Lavrion, left **Athens** at 3 p.m., and when the commander approached **Markopoulon** he was surprised to be told by his advanced party that 'between **Markopoulon** and **Porto Rafti** there were English troops who were abandoning their vehicles and fleeing on foot towards the coast.' Troops were immediately sent to investigate, but once through the village they came under the accurate fire of 'at least 6 guns, mortars and MGs.' A fighting patrol which was then sent forward reported the strongly held positions between the village and **Porto Rafti**. The German commander, having no artillery, sent his adjutant to ask **XXXX Corps** for a Stuka attack and ordered his own troops not to advance east of the village. Fortunately for **4 Brigade** it was then too late for this attack to be arranged and too late when the adjutant returned for the battalion to move forward. The brigade group was therefore able to make its undisturbed withdrawal, a German patrol reporting next morning that all the British troops had gone.

TO GREECE

FOURTH BRIGADE EMBARKS AT PORTO RAFTI

Fourth Brigade embarks at Porto Rafti

As seen by the men of 4 Brigade, the engagement was naturally more tense and more dramatic. About 3.30 p.m. the long German column had come into sight, armoured fighting vehicles had approached the village and the artillery with 4 Brigade had opened up. Some reports say that the guns and mortars dealt with the Germans only when they emerged from the village; other observers saw 'shell after shell land among the homes of the peaceful friendly folk of **Markopoulon**.' ¹ As it was, the Germans made no serious effort to advance beyond the village; their main stream of vehicles was moving south to Lavrion and their more serious offensive was to have been the air attack which did not eventuate.

At last when the light had faded the final stage of the withdrawal began. The field guns were wrecked about 8.45 p.m., the anti-aircraft guns thereafter covering the road from **Markopoulon** and the coastal

¹ D. W. Sinclair, *19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 100.

track from the south. Stage by stage units came through the lines of 19 Battalion; the pinnaces, whaleboats and caiques took the men out to the cruiser **Ajax** and the destroyers **Kingston** and **Kimberley**; 19 Battalion then went aboard and finally the embarkation staff. In all 3840 men ¹ were taken off and landed next morning at **Suda Bay** in **Crete**.

The group at **Rafina**, about 1000 men, had an even more anxious time waiting under cover in the scrub on the south side of the harbour and disturbed by aircraft bombing the abandoned transport about the

area. Brigadier Charrington had made plans for some to leave that night in a caique and for the majority to march to **Porto Rafti** to embark with 4 Brigade.

The information was taken across to Puttick's headquarters, probably by Major Oakes ² of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, but when the Germans approached **Markopoulon** the move from **Rafina** was impossible. The naval officer with the beach staff then arranged for the destroyer **Havock** to be diverted to that port and Oakes returned to warn the group of the change of plans.

Brigadier Charrington and about 600 men had in the meantime set out after dark to march the 15 miles to **Porto Rafti**. On the way they found that the Germans were between them and the port but, fortunately, they met Oakes and the majority of them returned to **Rafina**. There they waited anxiously for the destroyer to appear. About midnight one of the ship's boats, whose crew had been drifting about the bay waiting for the sound of English voices, came up to the beach. The two groups, ³ Charrington's and that from the caique, were then swiftly embarked and taken to **Crete** with 4 Brigade Group from **Porto Rafti**.

¹ With this group were six very fortunate soldiers who had gone to **Kea Island** on the night of 24–25 April (see pp. 403 and 428). Late in crossing the mountains, they had at dusk on 26 April seen the LCT moving away with the main party. Then, returning to Port Nikolo, they had arrived only to find that the destroyer **Nubian** had left. The following afternoon, however, two caiques had appeared, on one of which there were some fifteen New Zealand sappers and a naval crew disguised as Greeks. In it they were taken off and eventually transferred to the destroyer **Kimberley**.

² Maj T. H. E. Oakes, 2 i/c 7 NZ Anti-Tank Regiment, had arrived after a difficult journey during which he lost his vehicle. Other reports state that officers from HQ 1 Armoured Brigade made similar journeys.

³ There were others who had more exhausting and more romantic escapes. Two parties, each of twelve men, under Lieutenant D. B. Patterson and Second-Lieutenant A. F. Harding respectively, set out on the march to **Porto Rafti** but never received the orders to return to **Rafina**. By 1.30 a.m., exhausted and still far from **Porto Rafti**, they had to stop. Patterson remained with the majority of the men while Harding set out with the others to find the embarkation beach. Meeting four Greeks who offered to row his party there, he sent back two men to advise Patterson and hurried on, reaching the *Ajax* about 2.30 a.m. Her crew could give no assistance, but it was suggested that the *Kingston* might be able to send round a boat to pick up the others. The search in the darkness for this ship so exhausted the Greeks that Harding with his party had eventually to go aboard the *Ajax*. Patterson and about twenty men, soon realising that they were left to their own resources, acquired a 40-foot caique and sailed away, picking up off shore Captain G. M. Beaumont of 5 Field Regiment, who had decided to make his own way in a rowing boat. They called at Kithnos, Serifos, and Sifnos, met Lieutenant Kelsall and his party at Milos (see p. 420) and eventually reached **Suda Bay** in **Crete**.

TO GREECE

THE WITHDRAWAL OF 6 BRIGADE TO MONEMVASIA, 27-28 APRIL

The Withdrawal of 6 Brigade to Monemvasia, 27-28 April

On 27 April, when 4 Brigade was waiting to embark from Porto Rafti, 6 Brigade was in the **Tripolis** area preparing to move south that night to **Monemvasia**. As the troops had by then learnt the value of concealment they suffered little from air attacks. Those who took the greatest risks were the staff and reconnaissance parties moving south to the embarkation area. **General Freyberg** visited Brigade Headquarters and it was decided that there should be one long night withdrawal, a distance of over 100 miles across several mountain ranges with tortuously winding roads. The instructions were then issued, but it was suddenly decided that 26 Battalion should move that day, leaving the road relatively clear for the other battalions.

About midday the companies were strung out along the highway and enemy aircraft were soon active. However, a working party went ahead to fill in bomb craters, orders about dispersal were strictly enforced and the Divisional Supply Column drivers maintained a high average speed, driving south-east across the plain and over the mountains to the **Sparta** area, one of the loveliest in **Greece**. Away to the west was the blue wall of the Taygetus Range overshadowing the orange and mulberry groves, the oleanders and cypresses, and the fields of gladioli, hyacinths and asphodels. The road continued southwards over the hills, passing one village after another, each with its flock of sheep, its pigs, its goats and its fowls, its olive trees and its dark-green orange grove. Finally, instead of continuing south to **Yithion**, the port of **Sparta**, they turned south-eastwards to the small plain about **Molaoi**, about 15 miles from the evacuation beaches at **Monemvasia**.

The withdrawal that night of 24 and 25 Battalions was not delayed by the approach of any German force. The Divisional Supply Column moved forward up the narrow, winding one-way road to the defences on

the northern hills. After turning round at the crest of the pass—no other suitable point could be found— the Column collected 25 Battalion and hastened south through Tripolis. The companies of 24 Battalion, already embussed and waiting in the centre of the town, then moved off, the drivers concentrated on their task and by morning, after the fastest night move of the campaign, the battalions were safely under cover near Molaoui. Fourth Field Ambulance, which had left about 8.30 p.m., was already there with the thirty-seven wounded, some of them from the Greek hospital in Tripolis.

TO GREECE

EMBARKATION SUCCESSES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS, NIGHT 27-28 APRIL

Embarkation Successes and Disappointments, Night 27-28 April

For other units in Greece the night of 27–28 April had probably been more tense than it had been for 6 Brigade. Fourth Brigade at **Porto Rafti** and the mixed group at **Rafina**, though in contact with the assembling German forces, had been left to embark undisturbed. But for those waiting on the beaches at **Tolos** and **Kalamata** there were only hours of disappointment.

In the **Tolos– Navplion** area 1500 men had been left ¹ behind on the night of 26–27 April. Many were stragglers, but there were 200 men from 3 Royal Tank Regiment who had become detached from the main body and 150 from the ‘Australian Composite Battalion’ who had been sent back from Tripolis Pass to cover the embarkation. They now provided a rearguard covering the beach at **Tolos**, where the others in four columns waited for the destroyers which never appeared. At 3 a.m. they dispersed, efforts were made to collect boats or caiques, and officers were told by Colonel J. H. Courage that they and their men could take to the hills or escape by boat. The small force from the Australian battalion attempted to hold the beach but by the late afternoon, 28 April, it had been overwhelmed. ²

At **Monemvasia** there was as yet no embarkation staff. The only group at the little port was that of Colonels Quilliam and Blunt who had been acquiring local caiques for future evacuation. They left that night for Kithira Island, ³ where they set about organising the evacuation of the several hundred men who had missed the other embarkations.

Farther south at **Kalamata** ships had been expected and some 7000 men, including the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion, had assembled ⁴ on the beach. But the **Navy** did not arrive. Some units kept their formation and returned to their particular areas but others broke

up, the men seeking cover in the extensive olive groves between the town and eastern mountains.

¹ See pp. 428–9.

² The confusion which developed in the **Navplion- Tolos** area during 28 April was intensified by several air attacks and finally by the approach of detachments from *5 Panzer Division*. Even so, many parties escaped, some finding boats along the beach, others hastening south until they found seaworthy caiques. Among them were Lieutenant Staveley and the eight men from 4 Field Regiment who had already escaped by caique from **Volos** to **Khalkis** and had then been sent south to **Argos**. Like several other groups, they left the beach under fire and rowed down the coast to Kiparissi. Here they obtained a caique and went south with some British officers to Cape Malea, where they met other New Zealanders. They then set out for **Crete**, but when their vessel was disabled in a storm they put in to the island of Antikithira. Obtaining another caique and accompanied by some Greeks, they reached, on 4 May, the coast of **Crete** at **Kastelli**, to the west of **Maleme** airfield. All but three or four of the thirty men from the **Divisional Cavalry** Regiment and 28 (Maori) Battalion who had come over the hills from the **Corinth Canal** were equally successful. Not being evacuated from **Navplion** on the night of 26–27 April, they had walked the 15 miles to **Tolos**. Then, when it was definite that there would be no evacuation on the night of 27–28 April, they made their own arrangements. One group, European and Maori, led by Captain E. R. Harford and Lieutenant M. P. Studholme, seized an 18-foot boat, crossed the bay and went down the coast, rowing in shifts from island to island and eventually reaching **Crete** in a Greek fishing boat. Another group had hired a caique and was about to leave the bay when a German patrol boat appeared. The caique was sunk but Lieutenant I. L. Bonifant and others took to the hills, joined up with British and Greek troops, and about ten days later slipped away in another caique to Kithira and thence to **Crete**.

³ See p. 446.

⁴ See p. 451.

TO GREECE

THE EMBARKATION OF 6 BRIGADE FROM MONEMVASIA, 28-29 APRIL

The Embarkation of 6 Brigade from Monemvasia, 28-29 April

The following day, 28 April, 6 Brigade remained in its dispersal area between the villages of Sikea and **Molaoi** on the small plain about 15 miles west of **Monemvasia**. Aircraft were often over the area but the troops sheltering in the magnificent olive groves remained undiscovered. Along the coast it was different. Reconnaissance aircraft appeared early that morning and dive-bombers were soon attacking an LCT which had left **Navplion** on the night of 26–27 April with 600 Australians. Laid up and unseen during daylight it had, on the night of 27–28 April, been taken south to **Monemvasia**. There the Australians had disembarked, but the LCT when moving out to a more secluded beach had been observed. She was soon on fire. The embarkation of 6 Brigade had thus become more difficult, the LCAs scattered about the nearby beaches being as yet the only available small craft.

Another problem was that of defence should the Germans come through from the **Corinth Canal** area. There was no artillery or supporting weapons and only a limited supply of small-arms ammunition. The mountain roads were ideal for demolition but the few engineers in the **Peloponnese** had limited supplies of explosives. On 26 April, before the move south from **Miloi**, Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton's demolition party had been very small—a few men from 6 Field Company and six troopers from C Squadron Divisional Cavalry, all survivors from the parachute attacks about the Canal—and his equipment had been two pounds of gelnite, some fuses and some detonators. As the only answer was to use depth-charges, he had consulted the naval officers with Headquarters **W Force** before they left that night for **Crete**. The naval tender at **Miloi** supplied one charge and three more were afterwards obtained from a grounded Greek destroyer at **Monemvasia**.

With these slight resources the brigade group prepared to cover its

embarkation on the night of 28–29 April. Using the depth-charges, the engineers demolished a bridge some 16 miles out from **Monemvasia**. Brigadier Lee then posted Captain K. A. Carroll with his two platoons from 2/6 Australian Battalion to cover the demolition. About four miles to the south 24 and 25 Battalions were under cover, with the officers reconnoitring the ground and the men enjoying a much-needed rest. The Germans seem to have had no idea that the brigade had turned off to **Monemvasia**; they must have decided that the force had followed the other British units to **Kalamata**. Beyond them again and astride the road was an improvised detachment under Major Petrie, ¹ 18 Battalion, consisting of stragglers from different units and part of **Lee Force**. Then, some four miles from the other battalions and eight miles from the beach, were 26 Battalion, 4 Field Ambulance and Brigade Headquarters. Strung out along the road from there to the beach were the odds and ends from British and Australian units and finally, in a valley near the harbour, Divisional Headquarters.

The scenery which the majority of the brigade did not see to appreciate when they embarked that night was magnificent. **Monemvasia**, ‘the Gibraltar of **Greece**’, was really a peninsula with open roadsteads to the north and south. On its flat crest above the cliffs some 900 feet high a town of 30,000 people had once existed, a key point in the Eastern Mediterranean and the distributing centre for Malmsey wine. In 1941 a few people lived in the old buildings on the south side between the rocky coast and the base of the cliffs, but the majority lived on the mainland in a village overlooking the beaches.

The chief anxiety of the day for **General Freyberg**, apart from the threat of a German attack, was the uncertainty about shipping. At daybreak he saw the dive-bombers sink the LCT which would have been so useful as a lighter between the shore and the ships. About midday Admiral Baillie-Grohman came down the coast to say that there was still some uncertainty about the arrival of the convoy. But he had one piece of good news. The LCAs, assault landing craft specially designed for working to and from beaches, would be coming in that night.

Nevertheless there was still every chance of an incomplete evacuation. One battalion might have to remain until the following night, and since it was the turn of 24 Battalion to undertake the next rearguard duty, Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth had to select the most favourable position for a last stand. During the afternoon, however, several small boats and a Greek caique were made available. Each battalion supplied men accustomed to handling boats and Second-Lieutenant **Andrews**,² **Divisional Signals**, organised a supplementary ferry service from the beach to the caique and thence to the vessels of the convoy. As a result of their labours it was eventually possible for 24 Battalion to embark that night.

The arrangements for embarkation were most carefully prepared by Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry and other members of the divisional staff and once darkness fell the move to the beaches began. Fourth

¹ Major M. De R. Petrie; **Wellington**; born **Christchurch**, 9 Aug 1895; company secretary; 2 i/c **18 Bn** 1940–41.

² **Maj A. A. Andrews**; Wainui, Banks Peninsula; born Fairlie, 28 Sep 1909; civil servant; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

Field Ambulance and the wounded left first, then 26 Battalion, Brigade Headquarters, 25 Battalion and finally 24 Battalion. As each unit approached the port the men wrecked their vehicles and marched down to join the waiting columns.

About 9 p.m. the first troops arrived and looked anxiously for the ships. 'I feel sure that those last hours of waiting on the beach were the most anxious that we had had.'¹ The evacuation might be incomplete or, worse still, it might not take place at all. Baillie-Grohman had no confirmation that the ships were arriving, he did not know if they would be transports or naval vessels, and, moreover, he did not know if his signal about the actual embarkation point in the large bay had ever been received. To prevent any misunderstanding he sent an officer in an LCA

to move beyond the bay. There he found the cruiser and the four destroyers; they were actually on their way in to **Monemvasia**.

The embarkation which began at 11.50 p.m. was mainly from the two piers and the causeway connecting **Monemvasia** with the mainland. The cruiser ***Ajax*** and the destroyers ***Havock***, ***Hotspur***, ***Griffin*** and ***Isis*** closed well in and the whole embarkation was then 'remarkably well carried out.'²

The only delay was in the embarkation of the wounded. They had been sent off first, but the boats had returned with them because only destroyers were then in the bay and they could not accommodate wounded men. The ***Ajax*** which had yet to appear would take them all. In the meantime they had to remain on the pier with the anxious controlling staff regretting the delay. However, as more ships and landing craft drew in the speed of embarkation increased. The ***Ajax*** approached and the lines of stretcher cases were taken aboard, the columns grew shorter and it became certain that the whole force would be embarked. At 3 a.m. in the last boatload **General Freyberg** and Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman, Brigadiers Galloway, Barrowclough and Lee, with Battle Headquarters, set out for the ***Ajax***. And at eight o'clock next morning, 29 April, the convoy with some 4320 all ranks aboard arrived at **Suda Bay**.

The same night the destroyers ***Auckland***, ***Salvia*** and ***Hyacinth*** had gone to Kithira Island and taken off 60 soldiers, 700 Royal Air Force personnel³ and 60 Greek soldiers.

The troops of these two convoys were not landed in **Crete**. In the original plan all units were to have been taken from **Greece** to Egypt; the movement to **Crete** of many formations, including 4 and 5 New Zealand Brigades, had only been an effort to hasten

¹ GOC's report.

² Cunningham's despatch, Enclosure I, para. 47.

³ See pp. 443, 450.

the turn-round of the ships. Moreover, Admiral Cunningham was extremely anxious to evacuate from **Crete** as many troops as possible before there was any serious interference from the enemy. Baillie-Grohman had therefore arranged for a convoy with a strong escort to leave **Suda Bay** that same morning for **Alexandria**. Seven transports were already assembled when the warships steamed in from **Monemvasia** and Kithira Island, so the troops in the destroyers and some from the ***Ajax*** were immediately transferred to the ***Thurland Castle*** and ***Comliebank***. In the other transports there already were the consular staff and British subjects from **Greece**, **Royal Air Force** personnel and British seamen, walking wounded and nurses, including the New Zealand group who had been in **Crete** since 25 April. At 11 a.m. the convoy sailed, and all of 6 Brigade who had embarked at **Monemvasia** reached **Alexandria** on 1 May.

General Freyberg and his senior staff officers, Stewart and Gentry, had remained, the General wishing to spend the night in **Crete** before flying to Egypt the following day in a Sunderland. That evening, however, his departure was cancelled. Next morning, 30 April, Wavell, who had just arrived from **Cairo**, placed him in command of the forces in **Crete**, the majority of whom were the British, Australian and New Zealand formations evacuated from **Greece**.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 21 – KALAMATA

CHAPTER 21

Kalamata

The Germans occupy the Peloponnese, 28-29 April

ON 28 April there had been two German forces moving south into the **Peloponnese**: **III Battalion SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division** from **Patrai** and **5 Panzer Division** from **Corinth**. The former, having withdrawn the two trains it had sent to **Corinth**, went down the west coast to **Pirgos** and on 29 April, when the railway line was found to be undamaged, a reinforced company was sent to **Kalamata**. It arrived to find, as was the case at **Corinth**, that elements of **5 Panzer Division** were already established in the area.

No unit records describing the movements of **5 Panzer Division** on 28 April are now available but one brief report ¹ states that the unit, with two companies of paratroopers under command, pursued the British through **Argos** and **Tripolis** to **Navplion** and **Kalamata**. At 6.10 p.m., according to messages from the *Luftwaffe*, the advanced guard had entered **Miloi**. A detachment from it was, almost certainly, the force which dealt with the British and Australian troops who had not been evacuated from the nearby ports of **Navplion** and **Tolos**. The main body hastened south and later in the day was beyond **Tripolis** and past the side road along which 6 New Zealand Brigade had gone to **Monemvasia**. As the *Luftwaffe* did not observe ² any movement in that area, the troops were left to embark undisturbed. But it meant that the forward company of **5 Panzer Division**, when it reached **Kalamata** that evening, was in time to prevent the embarkation of 7000 men.

¹ Appendix 118 to *XXXX Corps* diary, April 1941.

² See p. 444.

Among them there were many New Zealanders. At 7.10 p.m. on 25 April the hastily organised Reinforcement Battalion had left **Voula Camp** and, after collecting the detachments which had been on guard about **Athens** and **Piræus**, moved westwards towards the embarkation point at **Navplion**. As base units of all types were on the highway it was difficult in the stream of traffic to remain as a complete formation, particularly after the irritating traffic jam which developed when the convoy turned off to collect the guard from the oil dumps at **Elevisis**. On the other hand there were no air raids. The *Luftwaffe* was not operating at night so, although there were the abandoned trucks on the cliff road beyond **Megara** and the wreckage about the railway station at **Corinth** to impede the way, the majority of the vehicles were, before dawn, across the canal and approaching **Argos**. In the distance the drivers could see the *Ulster Prince* at **Navplion**, aground from the previous night and still burning after the day's air raids.

At this stage the evacuation plans had been changed; ¹ more use was to be made of **Kalamata**; and the military police were directing all traffic along the road to **Tripolis**. The route was therefore south through **Argos**, past **Miloi** where 6 Brigade had assembled, and up the winding road to the crest of the Ktenas Range. At sunrise, however, the walls of **Navplion** could be seen glistening across the bay and many of the officers, not having been warned of the diversion and thinking that some mistake had been made, chose to turn back when half-way up the mountainside. When the traffic jam was at its worst **General Freyberg** appeared, the vehicles were swiftly turned about again and before long the battalion was through the hills and approaching **Tripolis**.

From this junction town 6 Brigade, when its turn came, was to withdraw south-east to **Monemvasia**, but on 26 April any movement on the road was south-west to the port of **Kalamata**. The headquarters group from the Reinforcement Battalion was therefore instructed by the military authorities in the town to continue south-west with the British and Australian convoys. This meant crossing another range to **Megalopolos** and continuing south across hills cloaked with bracken and

stunted mountain oak to the plain of Messinia, a world of orange groves and cypress trees. Thereafter they skirted the eastern fringe, following the highway lined with aloes and cactus plants and finally turning eastwards over a slight rise to the town and port of **Kalamata**. The majority of the convoys went through to the eastern olive groves but the trucks of the Reinforcement Battalion, arriving late that afternoon and all through the night, assembled under cover several miles to the north.

In the town itself there were other detachments of New Zealanders. Lieutenants **Wilder**,² **Simpson**³ and **Watt**,⁴ all attached to Headquarters **80 Base Sub-area**, had travelled south with that

¹ See pp. 406– 7.

² **Lt-Col N. P. Wilder**, DSO; **Waipukurau**; born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; patrol commander LRDG; CO 2 NZ Div Cav, 1944; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

³ **Capt E. H. Simpson**; **Marton**; born Marton, 11 Feb 1908; farmer; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

⁴ **Capt T. N. S. Watt**, ED; **New Plymouth**; born Riversdale, 22 May 1912; school-teacher; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

organisation. The misdirected platoons¹ from 24 Battalion had come through from **Tripolis**. Second-Lieutenant **Reed**² and F Troop 30 Battery 6 Field Regiment had had a similar and perhaps more interesting story. On its way south from **Thermopylae** the troop had been diverted by the traffic authorities at **Elevisis** to the **Navplion– Corinth** area instead of eastwards to **Athens** and **Porto Rafti**. Once in the line of traffic the troop had gone on to **Kalamata**, where like the platoons from 24 Battalion it was quite independent of the Reinforcement Battalion.

In addition there were many New Zealanders who had, in the general confusion of the withdrawal, lost contact with their units. Some had

moved south with the hospital cases after the bombing of the *Hellas* in **Piræus** harbour; others who came in late that night or early next morning had escaped from the **Corinth Canal** area. Among them were men from 28 (Maori) Battalion Bren-carrier platoon and remnants of the detachment sent from **Voula Camp** with Lieutenant J. S. Findlay to guard the **Khalkis** bridge. The latter had come south to embark at 'D' Beach east of **Athens**, but they had been switched west from **Elevsis** towards **Corinth** and after the parachute attack had continued south to **Kalamata**.

As yet there had been no official embarkation from this port, but the **Royal Air Force** group, acting independently and arriving from **Argos** on 24 April, had already sent 200 men in Sunderland flying boats to **Crete** and a still larger number in a 500-ton freighter to the island of Kithira.³ On the night of 25–26 April another Sunderland had been sent over but it crashed in the harbour. Next morning, however, the naval embarkation officer, Captain Clark- Hall, RN, arrived and the **Royal Air Force** personnel, mostly technical tradesmen, had been given priority when embarkation began that night.

The military units directed south by Army Movement Control had been collecting in the olive groves all through 25 and 26 April and now, under the command of Brigadier L. P. Parrington, MC, there were about 16,000 men: **Allen Group** (16 and 17 Australian Brigades and Corps troops), many detachments of base troops, Palestinians and Cypriot labourers, Yugoslav soldiers and refugees, Indian mule drivers and Lascar seamen.

That night, 26–27 April, 8000 of them, including the majority of the Australians, were evacuated in the transports *Dilwarra*, *City of London* and *Costa Rica*. Escorting them were the destroyers *Phoebe*,

¹ See pp. 425– 6.

² Maj C. K. Reed, DSO, m.i.d.; *Napier*; born Tolaga Bay, 3

Mar 1915; bank clerk; 6 Fd Regt 1941-45; 2 i/c 4 Fd Regt Feb-Jul 1945; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

³ *See p. 446 for their evacuation, together with the groups which had reached there from the port of **Yithion**.*

*Flamingo, Hero, **Hereward** and **Defender**, the last named taking 250 men and the crown jewels of **Yugoslavia**. Next morning the ships became part of convoy GA 14 ¹ which sailed direct to **Alexandria**.*

*Left behind were 8000 men, mostly from base units except for 380 Australians under Lieutenant-Colonel H. G. F. Harlock, 50 men from 3 Royal Tank Regiment who had been manning Royal Air Force trucks and helping stragglers to the beaches south of **Corinth**, the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion immediately outside the town, and the 300 men from **4 Hussars** who had completed their journey from the Gulf of **Corinth** and were now the rearguard 20 miles to the north. As a fighting force the group was not strong but Brigadier Parrington, the area commander, assured the senior officers that embarkation was possible that night. So the men did their best to endure another day's bombing and strafing before assembling on the beaches to the east of the town.*

After dark on 27 April the groups were on the move, the Reinforcement Battalion taking its vehicles through the town to the assembly area near the junction of the Beach road and that lane from the north which the authorities called the Link road. ² From there the Australians had marched back to the harbour to embark in the destroyers which transferred them to the transports lying off shore. Expecting similar procedure, the columns moved hopefully along the Beach road towards the harbour between the great curving mole to the west and the breakwater to the east. Inset into the waterfront were several landing stages and then the inner basin. To the north, across the open waterfront with its tramline and its garden plots, were the solidly constructed buildings of the business area, the side streets and the railway from the ancient town to the modern port.

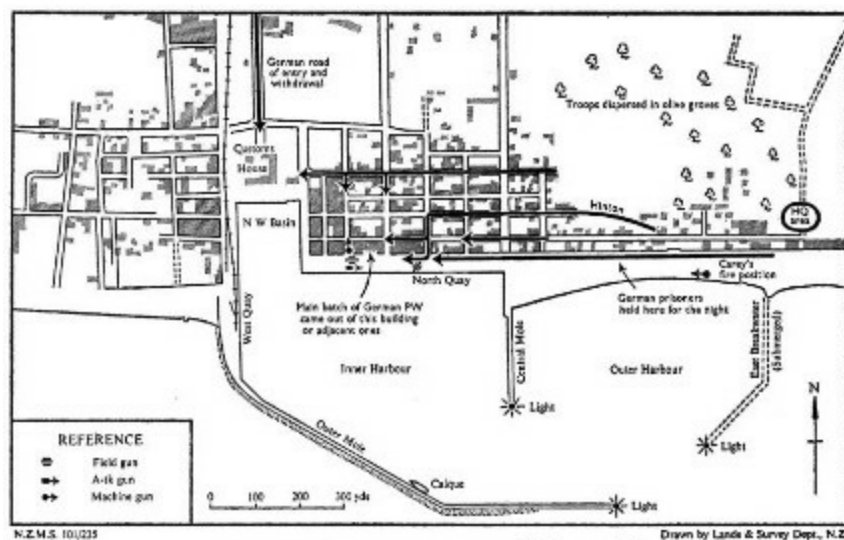
The patient columns waited until midnight, when they were told that there would be no embarkation. Many of the men returned to their unit areas, but those who had wrecked their trucks and those who were weary because of long journeys and the strain of air raids took refuge in the nearby olive groves. The majority of the Reinforcement Battalion seem to have returned to their area beside the road and to the north of the town.

¹ See pp. 430– 1.

² Link road ran north-south and connected the **Sparta** and **Beach** roads.

The German Advanced Guard enters Kalamata

The next day, 28 April, saw more air raids and more casualties, until by nightfall there were 200 military wounded in the Greek hospital. The rumours of the parachute landings about the **Corinth**



THE BATTLE FOR KALAMATA WATERFRONT, 28-29 APRIL 1941

Canal had been confirmed the previous evening, but at 4 p.m. 4 Hussars reported that there were as yet no signs of the approaching enemy. Nevertheless Major MacDuff, when he reported that afternoon to

Brigadier Parrington, was instructed to cover the embarkation. The men were already on their way to the assembly areas of the previous night, but MacDuff decided that A Company could cover the approaches to the waterfront from the north and B Company the **Sparta** road which extended eastwards from the town.

The plan was never put into operation. The outer screen of 4 Hussars had already been overwhelmed by the advanced guard of **5 Panzer Division**, which was now hurrying south from the canal area. No warning could be given to the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion; in any case, the majority of that unit had already moved into **Kalamata**. But the covering party, including Captains Yates and **Bryson**¹ and Lieutenant Curtis, who were waiting for stragglers, and Major **Thomson**,² who was attending to some wounded, was surprised and captured. Several men attempted to break away. Some were successful, but the majority were checked by bursts of machine-gun fire and soon marched back to join **4 Hussars** in the open trucks at the end of the column. The force then moved on, Major Thomson accompanying the German medical officer. Meeting with no opposition and capturing still more prisoners, the Germans entered the town, crossed the bridge over the dry creek and turned south to the harbour, where they drew up near the Customs House. The prisoners were hustled off the vehicles and placed under guard; the Germans, obviously surprised at the number of soldiers about the town, began to probe eastwards along the waterfront.

Just how much time they had to establish themselves before darkness came down it is now impossible to estimate. The important fact was that there had been no serious opposition. The majority of the Allied troops were already to the east of the town; the rest were drifting along the tracks and side roads to the assembly areas. There had certainly been some intermittent rifle fire, but that had been common enough during the day and caused no inquiry. The result was that still more men were surprised and captured.

The greatest misfortune of all was the capture of Captain Clark-

Hall, who, with his signalman, had been about to go down to the waterfront. Thereafter the difficulty of communicating with the Navy was to be the vital problem of the evacuation.

¹ **Capt C. D. Bryson, ED; Sydney; born Auckland, 22 Sep 1904; accountant; p.w. Apr 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.**

² **Maj G. H. Thomson, OBE, ED; New Plymouth; born Dunedin, 5 Mar 1892; obstetrician; gunner, 4 How Bty, Egypt and Gallipoli, 1914–16; RMO 4 Fd Regt Sep 1939–Apr 1941; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; repatriated Oct 1943.**

Two New Zealand officers, Lieutenant **Daniel**¹ and Second-Lieutenant **Willis**,² after bringing their men to the waterfront, had gone to MacDuff's headquarters near the junction of Link and Beach roads. On their way back along one of the side streets they saw grey-uniformed soldiers in the distance but thought that they were some of the Yugoslavs—until a German had appeared from a doorway with an automatic and marched them back to the Customs House area, already packed with prisoners, lorries and AFVs.

The Germans had by then realised that they were in great danger. They questioned prisoners about the arrival of the convoy; they wanted to know how many men were at the other end of the waterfront and when there were signs of a counter-attack they became very disturbed. The prisoners were then marched back towards the town, across the bridge and along the highway to the waiting vehicles of the main body.

While this was taking place, the arrival of the enemy force had become known to the thousands assembled in the olive groves.

When the first reports reached the different headquarters the senior officers had been inclined to doubt the nerve of their informants. But a liaison officer ordered back to **4 Hussars** returned to say that the road through the town was blocked by the enemy; lorry drivers rushed back from the hospital area calling out that there were Germans in the town;

more regular bursts of machine-gun fire were heard; and men could be seen running back to the safety of the olive groves.

The next stage of the action cannot be told in exact detail but the first serious opposition seems to have come from Major B. Carey, 3 Royal Tank Regiment, who with Major Pemberton, Royal Signals, had been walking towards the harbour when excited men had rushed back along the waterfront. Pemberton went back to warn Brigadier Parrington. Carey, collecting a Bren gun, spent the next two hours on the seaward side of the Beach road firing at the German guns on the quay and encouraging those among the Allied soldiers who wished to fight.

About the same time Lieutenant-Colonel H. H. E. Geddes, Royal **Army Service Corps**, and Lieutenant-Colonel J. P. Robinson, 8 Hussars, had been approaching the waterfront. The bursts of machine-gun fire and the reports from men running back for shelter soon convinced them that the enemy had reached the quay. They decided that paratroops must have landed; neither thought that the enemy could have driven down the highway and through **Kalamata**. Geddes went forward with what troops he could collect, joined

¹ **Capt M. E. Daniel**; born NZ 25 Apr 1916; clerk; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

² **Capt H. F. Willis**; **Auckland**; born Kirkee, **India**, 7 Sep 1919; student; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

Carey and learnt something of the German positions. Then he returned to the olive groves and from there organised parties to clear the streets inland from and parallel to the waterfront. The majority were New Zealand, Australian and British troops, some led by non-commissioned officers, others by officers.

The small Australian force, though short of weapons, was equally active. Lieutenant-Colonel Harlock organised parties while Captain A. W.

Gray sent one platoon with the New Zealand groups and led another along the waterfront.

The other source of resistance—probably the major one—was the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion, whose headquarters had been established by Major MacDuff at the junction of the Link and Beach roads. Before the fighting actually started, Lieutenants O'Rorke ¹ and Rhind ² had been sent to see that the covering companies went into position. On their instructions Captain Simmonds, ³ with men from B Company, Lieutenant D. R. Brickell and his platoon, and Lieutenant J. W. Moodie from Battalion Headquarters moved back to cover the Sparta road and the eastern exit from the town. Warned by lorry loads of troops yelling 'Jerries in town' and by Greeks who called out 'Germania', the group reached the crossroads 'on the run'. Directed by Moodie, who knew the latest technique of street fighting, they had pulled down stone walls and prepared a defence post. At the same time Lieutenant F. G. Spackman had been sent forward by Major MacDuff to find out who was responsible for the bursts of rifle fire: 'if Greeks to shut them up; if Germans to find out where they were.' At the bridge he collected a German car, the disturbed occupant of which was taken back to the beach for cross-examination. Soon afterwards a truck drawing a heavy gun and then a motor lorry had approached the road block, but bursts of fire had forced their drivers to swing hurriedly away. Thereafter the group was not disturbed; heavy fighting could be heard about the harbour, but it eventually died down and about midnight the men were ordered back to the beaches, where the crowds were assembling for the expected embarkation.

Meanwhile O'Rorke and Rhind, when moving towards the centre of the town, had heard bursts of fire and seen Germans in the area to the west where A Company was to have been placed. They had returned to the road junction, collected about twenty New Zealanders and Australians, and moved towards the enemy, Rhind along the waterfront, O'Rorke one street inland.

¹ Lt F. O'Rorke; born England, 31 Jul 1906; sheep-farmer; killed in action 28 Apr 1941.

² Capt P. K. Rhind; Christchurch; born Lyttelton, 20 Jun 1915; clerk; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; joined Regular Force; Area Commander, Christchurch, 1952–55.

³ Capt K. Simmonds; Dunedin; born England, 15 Mar 1907; factory manager; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

By then the light was fading and there was hopeless confusion in the thickly packed olive groves. If a soldier wished to fight he could do so—if he hesitated it was simple enough to remain among the excited thousands. Nevertheless, through the efforts of Geddes, Harlock and MacDuff, several parties had already moved off or were about to do so. The officers and men did not always know each other so it is impossible to record the names of many who took part in the actual fighting. But it is known that from this area patrols went in led by Lieutenants Canavan, ¹ Simpson, Watt, Davies, ² Buckleton, ³ Fay ⁴ and Harris. ⁵ Moving through the eastern outskirts of the town, they reached the back streets and approached the quay from the north.

Ahead of these parties, however, was another collected and led by Sergeant Hinton, ⁶ 20 Battalion. At the sound of firing he had gone to the headquarters corner and attempted to find out what was happening. Unable to get any response in the general confusion, he had moved along the Beach road towards the town and had then crawled across to Major Carey's gun post near the beach. With Carey's assurance of covering fire he had returned, collected about a dozen New Zealanders and started up the road to deal with the big gun which had just opened up. When machine-gun fire became too heavy, the party turned north up a side street and then went forward again a block or two inland from the waterfront. In this street Hinton dealt with a machine-gun post set up at a corner to cover the eastern and northern approaches.

At this stage there seems to have been a pause in the advance. The parties organised by MacDuff were coming in from the side streets to give their support but the scene was incredibly confusing. All was dark except for the streams of tracer bullets and the sudden clarity after a flare went up; mortar bombs were exploding; stray Germans hidden in the doorways opened fire, wounding several men, including O'Rorke and Sergeant **Hesson**; ⁷ and, most important of all, there was no overall command. In spite of these difficulties the attack was soon switched south towards the waterfront. Canavan and an Australian sergeant with their group covered the street in

¹ **Capt W. A. O'N. Canavan**, m.i.d.; born **Blenheim**, 19 Dec 1908; school-teacher; p.w. Apr 1941; died 7 Aug 1955.

² **Capt R. Davies**; born Newport, Wales, 20 Oct 1912; engineer fitter; p.w. Apr 1941; died of wounds while p.w. 21 Apr 1945.

³ **Capt J. G. Buckleton**, m.i.d.; born **Auckland**, 15 Jul 1908; sharebroker; p.w. Apr 1941.

⁴ **Capt J. A. O'L. Fay**; **Auckland**; born **Wellington**, 29 Jun 1912; insurance inspector; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁵ **Capt H. R. Harris**, ED; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 24 May 1907; company manager; wounded and p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

⁶ **Sgt J. D. Hinton**, VC, m.i.d.; **Templeton**; born **Riverton**, 17 Sep 1909; driver; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁷ **Sgt J. Hesson**; born NZ 18 Nov 1918; farmer; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943; died Alexandra, 10 Jul 1948.

which the German supply trucks were drawn up. Hinton, supported by covering fire from Private **A. M. Jones**,¹ moved down another street, dealing with machine-gun posts and reaching the waterfront near the more forward of the two heavy guns.

Meanwhile Rhind, with the supporting fire from Carey's group along the Beach road, had led his party from block to block along the waterfront until it met those coming in from the side streets. They were reorganising when 'a truck went up the road towards the German positions, loaded with N.Z. and Australian troops.'²

This truck, driven by Sapper **Gourlick**³ with eight men aboard, including Privates **Snooks**,⁴ **Turner**⁵ and **Lewis**,⁶ had been sent in by MacDuff. At some speed it had been rattled along from the olive groves, turned on to the waterfront and rushed forward to within 50 yards of the first gun. There it had been pulled up sharply, the crew dashing to cover up the nearest side street and opening fire on the Germans about the gun and along the open pavement of the quay. Their fire, Hinton's advance from the side street and, most probably, the never-ceasing machine-gun fire from Carey forced the gun crews to seek refuge in the buildings along the waterfront. Behind them they left the biggest collection of killed and wounded seen by any of those who took part in the action.

Thereafter the fighting was along the waterfront, from one block of buildings to another, the Germans withdrawing and leaving to the British the RAP set up by their captive, Major Thomson. Hinton, Jones and other members of the advance parties were wounded but reserves were hastening forward from the olive groves. They may have approached according to plan for Captain **G. A. F. Kennard**⁷ of **4 Hussars**, who had escaped from the Customs House area, had given MacDuff some useful information about the German strength and positions. But the actual fighting went on as before, without any direction whatsoever. Nevertheless it was spontaneous and irresistible. Some men broke into the buildings, others darted from

¹ **Pte A. M. Jones; Invercargill; born Greymouth, 13 Jul 1917; bricklayer; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

² **Information from Captain Rhind to D. J. C. Pringle (co-author 20 Battalion history); Major F. B. Topham; notes from Gourlick, Lewis, Snooks and Turner.**

³ **Spr W. P. Gourlick, MM; Mosgiel Junction; born NZ 11 Mar 1905; engineer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

⁴ **Pte C. Snooks; Taupo; born Waitara, 13 Jul 1916; butcher; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

⁵ **Pte W. G. Turner; Lyttelton; born NZ 27 Sep 1906; labourer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

⁶ **Pte O. R. Lewis; born NZ 17 Sep 1903; mechanic; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.**

⁷ **This officer, who had been captured outside the town, had ‘filed off’ when the fighting began and taken cover until he met a New Zealand officer, with whom he ‘doubled back’ to MacDuff’s headquarters.**

place to place, returning the bursts of fire that were coming from the windows and balconies of the last buildings overlooking the almost open waterfront.

No account of the initial stages of the surrender was prepared by the British. Members of the different groups very often did not know each other and within a few hours they themselves were to be taken prisoners of war. In a German propaganda publication ¹ there is, however, an account which more or less agrees with the reports of those who are known to have been in the immediate vicinity. The details are not always accurate, but the personal reference to at least one British officer

suggests that the author had interviewed German officers who had taken part in the action.

According to him one of the British had called upon the Germans to surrender. A lieutenant had replied, 'Fire stopping—finished', and had then been sent over with instructions not to surrender but to make a parley: 'We haven't a shot left. Gain time.' He had been forced to call over his company commander, but the 'Australians' had threatened to shoot both Germans 'unless within five minutes all encircled in the harbour laid down their arms.' At this stage an 'English Colonel' ² arrived and conducted the negotiations. The Germans probably mentioned the force outside the town and the hopelessness of the situation so far as the British were concerned, for they record that 'The wild fellows ... bellowed with indignation.' And that seems to have decided the case for by midnight the Germans had surrendered to whoever happened to be near and the final number was over 120 all ranks.

Their casualties had been heavy, particularly about the more forward of the two heavy guns and in one of the side streets where 'somebody must have caught them with a bren.' ³ In all there were 41 killed and 60 wounded. The British casualties were 3 officers and 30 other ranks killed and 50 or more wounded, who were cared for 'in what was called a British Hospital where a New Zealand doctor ⁴ was doing magnificent work with negligible equipment.'

The chances of evacuation now seemed to be good. Barriers were erected to control the roads, parties were detailed to hold them and efforts were made to signal the **Navy**.

The cruisers *Perth* and *Phoebe* and the destroyers *Nubian*, *Defender*, *Hereward*, *Decoy*, *Hasty* and *Hero* were already approaching the harbour. The last named had been sent ahead to make contact with the shore and at 8.45 p.m., using lamp signals,

¹ *From Serbia to Crete*, translated by the **War History**

Branch.

² Just who this was it is now impossible to say.

³ It has not been possible to find out who was responsible for these casualties.

⁴ Major Thomson.

Brigadier Parrington had told its commander that the Germans were in the town. An attempt to recapture the quay was already being undertaken. This was passed on to the *Perth* whose captain, Bowyer-Smith, ¹ was senior officer of the squadron. The *Hero* nosed her way closer to the beach, her first lieutenant went ashore and a review of the situation was wirelessly to the *Perth*. Soon afterwards, at 9.30 p.m., he reported that the beach was suitable for evacuation and the following signal was sent to the *Perth*, but owing to wireless defects it was not received until 10.11 p.m.:

Troops collecting on beach south-east of town. All firing ceased in town. Consider evacuation possible from beach. Brigadier is reporting.

By then Bowyer-Smith, acting on the earlier signals and observing fires and explosions ashore, had at 9.29 p.m. abandoned the operation and was moving south with all ships except the *Hero*. He did not alter his decision.

As the *Hero* had only two whalers the chances of embarkation were very limited. But the naval authorities in *Crete*, having been told that there were 1500 Yugoslavs and thousands of troops still in *Kalamata*, had sent over the *Kandahar*, *Kingston* and *Kimberley* to assist the original force. These destroyers arrived at 1 a.m. and more embarkation was possible. The sick and wounded from the hospital and the men wounded in the town had by then been taken to the beach, but there was still a shortage of boats and very little available time. So in the end only

332 all ranks were evacuated. As some fit men, including several New Zealanders, were among that number, it is regrettable that the majority of those who did the actual fighting were not evacuated. They saw the last boat leave the beach and were told that it would be back again. But it never appeared. The destroyers moved out about 3 a.m., signalling 'Many regrets' several times. The disappointed troops, unable to understand the departure of the ships, found their own solution and accepted the often repeated and quite incorrect rumour that the approach of an Italian fleet made it necessary for the destroyers to get clear of the coast.

The Brigadier then had the unpleasant task of calling his senior officers together and informing them of their hopeless situation. Any further resistance was considered impossible and unnecessary. Calls were made for any officer who could speak German and Captain Kennard was sent back with his German officer to say that the force would surrender before daybreak. Next morning swastikas were spread out on the beaches as a warning to the *Luftwaffe* to cease its bombing; the troops were assembled by the now exultant Germans; and for several days trainloads of prisoners were taken north to **Corinth** and to four unhappy years as prisoners of war.

¹ Captain Sir Philip Bowyer-Smith, RN.

The German Account of the Action at Kalamata

The only official German report of the action, the propaganda publication already quoted, gives few details: there had been a 'violent engagement' and 7000 British troops had surrendered. According to this booklet, one company from *5 Panzer Division* had approached **Kalamata** about 6.30 p.m., collecting 'little groups of stranded Tommies' on the way and entering the town. 'Things were quiet' so the force carried on to the waterfront. There was still no movement. Then about 7 p.m. rifle fire 'began to crackle ... isolated shots at first, so that nobody bothered', but

suddenly it increased in volume, the British 'sweeping the long quay with their fire.' One of the three armoured vehicles was put out of action and had to be shepherded into cover by the other two; the prisoners were sent back to the main body which was now outside the town; and the company prepared for all-round defence.

On the waterfront two machine guns and three PAK guns ¹ returned the fire and the motorised battery of two 15-centimetre guns went into action, firing over open sights in the direction of the olive groves. All British accounts state that only two shells came over, but the Germans describe how the twelve gunners worked with 'furious calm' until eight of them had fallen to the British fire. The machine-gunners, equally exposed, had their casualties, resistance slackened, and before long the British were appearing out of 'each side street and lane'. The German commander, collecting his men, made a last stand in some buildings towards the southern end of the waterfront. But they were 'shut in from all sides', and when their ammunition was exhausted they asked for a parley and were forced to surrender.

The enemy prisoners were marched back to the beach where British officers 'wrapped in their greatcoats' were waiting for the expected convoy. It did not appear, and about 4 a.m. on 29 April a British officer asked the captured company commander to take him as envoy to the highest-ranking German officer outside the town. So back they went to the battalion commander and the 450 men who were 'waiting with unspeakable impatience for the dawn.' The surrender was soon negotiated, the *Luftwaffe* was warned not to bomb the area and at dawn the British became prisoners of war.

¹ *Panzerabwehrkanone*: anti-tank gun.

Escape Parties

Nevertheless, many officers and men had already escaped or were attempting to escape. ² The first to make the effort were twenty-two

² Some RAF personnel had already been evacuated from **Yithion** and **Kalamata** in Sunderland aircraft. Another party at **Kardhamili**, a village some 20 miles south-east of **Kalamata**, left in a motor vessel for **Crete**.—See A. S. G. Lee, *Special Duties*, pp. 95–105. After the surrender of the main body many British officers and men rushed off by truck or on foot towards this village or the nearby coast, from which on succeeding nights some were collected by the **Navy**.

men who had dashed off into the olive groves and avoided capture when the German columns surprised the New Zealand companies outside **Kalamata**. Reaching the coast just west of the town and hearing the sound of the fighting, they made plans to reach the embarkation beach. Acquiring three small boats they set off, ten in one and six in each of the other two. The largest boat and one of the smaller ones successfully reached the eastern shores of the bay, where they were joined by another boat from **Kalamata**. Once again assisted by the Greeks, they made plans for a voyage to **Crete** and sailed that night, 29–30 April. The two small boats soon left the biggest one behind and their history is not known exactly. The big boat with its crew of ten ¹ carried on all the next day using makeshift sails, a map 'on the cover of a Greek-English conversation book' and the compass on the top of a fountain pen. That night the party was picked up by the *Isis*, one of the flotilla of destroyers sent over from **Crete** to collect any survivors.

The boat which failed to cross the bay on the first night had finished up some ten miles down the coast from **Kalamata**. Inland there were German units, but the Greeks gave assistance and Lieutenant **Poolman**, ² with five men, waited hoping to see ships come in to collect troops. At this stage they were joined by seven men who had escaped from **Kalamata** after the surrender. The combined groups, less three men who preferred other risks, finally sailed for **Crete** on 30 April, crossing the bay and by stages sailing down the coast to **Cape Matapan**. On the way they were joined by some of the men from one of the two smaller boats and on 8 May, by sailing south-east to **Kithira** and **Katra**, they reached

the port of **Kastelli** in **Crete**.

The rear party of the **Royal Air Force** had a different history.

Disappointed at the non-appearance of warships or **Sunderlands** during the night of 27–28 April, they had on 28 April moved to **Kardhamili**, a coastal village across the bay and about 20 miles south of **Kalamata**. A 30-foot motor boat had been chartered and all preparations made for a move that night. So when a motorcyclist brought the news of the German entry into **Kalamata**, the party left in daylight, creeping down the coast to **Cape Matapan** and eventually reaching **Kithira** and, on 30 April, **Suda Bay** in **Crete**.

Other parties did their best to escape from the town itself after **Brigadier Parrington** announced that they would not be taken off by the **Navy**. In the darkness and confusion of that night it was not easy to find boats and many made off along the coast to the east. Some got away far enough to avoid capture next morning and

¹ **Second-Lieutenant J. Rose** and nine other ranks, including ‘the skipper [**Sgt C. West, 20 Bn**] who comes from the oyster beds of the **Bluff, New Zealand**.’

² **Maj F. H. Poolman**, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Whangarei**; born **Greenmeadows, 11 Jan 1905**; Govt rural valuer; sqn comd and 2 i/c **Div Cav 1944**; twice wounded.

to be picked up by the **Navy** on the following two nights, but the majority of those who kept to the land were eventually captured. ¹

Those who found small boats were usually more successful. **Private Patterson** ² (**20 Battalion**) and a **Maori** found a dinghy, put to sea and were picked up by one of the destroyers. **Lieutenant E. H. Simpson**, after taking part in the recapture of the town, was sent out from the beach with a small party in a rowing boat to contact the destroyers vaguely to be seen off shore. The ships left soon afterwards and the soldiers, using their packing case paddles, were forced to land down the coast. Next

night they moved off shore, used the cordite from cartridge cases to make flares and were picked up by HMS *Isis*.

The more fortunate groups were able to find seaworthy vessels. Sergeant **Grimmond**³ (24 Battalion) and seven others seized a caique and Grimmond navigated it to **Crete**.⁴

Another caique was taken out by the men⁵ from 6 Field Regiment who had reached **Kalamata** quite independent of the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion. Not confident of getting away, Lieutenant Reed and his party had been encouraged by Gunner **McKenzie**⁶ to arrange for their own evacuation. During the morning they had found a caique anchored well out from the mole and had left Sergeants **Fenton**⁷ and **Lydster**⁸ and Gunner **Hodgetts**⁹ to prepare her for the open sea and to keep guard over her until nightfall. Unfortunately for them the Germans arrived just before dark, came along the mole and took the caretakers back to join the prisoners near the Customs House. The other members of the party, after the counter-attack and the announcement that there would be no evacuation, returned to the caique, took aboard the supplies McKenzie had collected, and remained hidden all through 29 April—not smoking, not talking, very hot and sometimes worried by the sound of German voices. No investigation was made, however, and when darkness came two men used the rowing boat and towed the caique beyond the mole and out to sea. They then made their way down the coast and across to **Crete**, where they landed on 7 May.

¹ Sergeant A. V. D. Flett and Private D. W. Donald of 24 Battalion were at large in **Greece** for over a year before being caught.

² Pte **D. D. Patterson**; **Invercargill**; born Glencoe, 24 Nov 1916; machinist; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

³ Sgt **A. J. Grimmond**, BEM; **Auckland**; born **Australia**, 9 Dec 1910; plasterer.

⁴ R. M. Burdon, *24 Battalion*, p. 48.

⁵ See p. 450.

⁶ L-Bdr N. G. McKenzie; Wellington; born NZ 12 Feb 1911; commercial traveller; p.w. Dec 1941.

⁷ Sgt F. T. Fenton; Te Puke; born Auckland, 15 Sep 1913; solicitor; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

⁸ Sgt N. R. Lydster; born NZ 10 Nov 1918; cashier; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

⁹ Gnr W. G. Hodgetts; Gore; born NZ 14 Jul 1904; driver; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

The Navy had in the meantime kept its promise to return. On 29–30 April, the night after the fighting, the destroyers *Isis*, *Hero* and *Kimberley* came over from Crete and picked up along the coast to the east of Kalamata some 16 officers and 17 other ranks, mainly from English units. The following night, 30 April–1 May, they were more successful, collecting 23 officers and 178 other ranks. And from Milos the *Hotspur* and *Havock* evacuated some 700 British and Palestinian troops who had reached that island from parts of Greece other than Kalamata.

Thereafter, until the airborne attack on 20 May, small parties made their way to Crete. Sometimes names were recorded, but very often the records were left behind on that island. The only reference may be a cable from Crete to New Zealand Headquarters in Egypt such as ‘Arrived Crete 14 May 13 other ranks’; a note that on 4 May forty arrived from Crete, ‘mostly New Zealanders’, who had been guarding the Shell Oil refinery; or the name of a Maori who had been captured at Kalamata and who by some unstated means had managed to escape. Sometimes those

who reached **Crete** rejoined their units, took part in the fighting and were then killed or captured. The **Mobile Dental Unit**, for instance, records that Driver **Ferris** ¹ escaped by small boat but was compelled to return to land for ten to fourteen days. There he met Drivers **Easton** ² and **Craig**, ³ who had been captured at **Kalamata** but had escaped and made their way through to the coast. Joining forces with eight other fugitives and securing a small boat, they reached **Crete** some days before the air attack. The survivors from the fighting joined in the march over the hills to the evacuation beaches, but several 'have not yet reported.' ⁴ Such a note in many of the war diaries for the **Crete** campaign explains why there are so many gaps in the history of the last few days in **Greece**.

¹ **Dvr W. W. Ferris**; Dunedin; born **Oamaru**, 16 Dec 1914; driver.

² **Dvr J. Easton**; **Oamaru**; born **Invercargill**, 13 Oct 1908; butcher; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; escaped to **Crete**; recaptured 1 Jun 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

³ **Dvr J. C. Craig**; Westport; born Westport, 23 Jan 1910; service-car driver; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; escaped to **Crete**; recaptured 1 Jun 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

⁴ War diary of ADDS, NZ Dental Corps, May 1941, Appx VI.

TO GREECE

THE GERMANS OCCUPY THE PELOPONNESE, 28-29 APRIL

The Germans occupy the Peloponnese, 28-29 April

ON 28 April there had been two German forces moving south into the **Peloponnese**: **III Battalion SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division** from **Patrai** and **5 Panzer Division** from **Corinth**. The former, having withdrawn the two trains it had sent to **Corinth**, went down the west coast to **Pirgos** and on 29 April, when the railway line was found to be undamaged, a reinforced company was sent to **Kalamata**. It arrived to find, as was the case at **Corinth**, that elements of **5 Panzer Division** were already established in the area.

No unit records describing the movements of **5 Panzer Division** on 28 April are now available but one brief report ¹ states that the unit, with two companies of paratroopers under command, pursued the British through **Argos** and **Tripolis** to **Navplion** and **Kalamata**. At 6.10 p.m., according to messages from the *Luftwaffe*, the advanced guard had entered **Miloi**. A detachment from it was, almost certainly, the force which dealt with the British and Australian troops who had not been evacuated from the nearby ports of **Navplion** and **Tolos**. The main body hastened south and later in the day was beyond **Tripolis** and past the side road along which 6 New Zealand Brigade had gone to **Monemvasia**. As the *Luftwaffe* did not observe ² any movement in that area, the troops were left to embark undisturbed. But it meant that the forward company of **5 Panzer Division**, when it reached **Kalamata** that evening, was in time to prevent the embarkation of 7000 men.

¹ Appendix 118 to *XXXX Corps* diary, April 1941.

² See p. 444.

TO GREECE

NEW ZEALAND TROOPS IN KALAMATA

New Zealand Troops in Kalamata

Among them there were many New Zealanders. At 7.10 p.m. on 25 April the hastily organised Reinforcement Battalion had left **Voula Camp** and, after collecting the detachments which had been on guard about **Athens** and **Piræus**, moved westwards towards the embarkation point at **Navplion**. As base units of all types were on the highway it was difficult in the stream of traffic to remain as a complete formation, particularly after the irritating traffic jam which developed when the convoy turned off to collect the guard from the oil dumps at **Elevisis**. On the other hand there were no air raids. The *Luftwaffe* was not operating at night so, although there were the abandoned trucks on the cliff road beyond **Megara** and the wreckage about the railway station at **Corinth** to impede the way, the majority of the vehicles were, before dawn, across the canal and approaching **Argos**. In the distance the drivers could see the *Ulster Prince* at **Navplion**, aground from the previous night and still burning after the day's air raids.

At this stage the evacuation plans had been changed; ¹ more use was to be made of **Kalamata**; and the military police were directing all traffic along the road to **Tripolis**. The route was therefore south through **Argos**, past **Miloi** where 6 Brigade had assembled, and up the winding road to the crest of the Ktenas Range. At sunrise, however, the walls of **Navplion** could be seen glistening across the bay and many of the officers, not having been warned of the diversion and thinking that some mistake had been made, chose to turn back when half-way up the mountainside. When the traffic jam was at its worst **General Freyberg** appeared, the vehicles were swiftly turned about again and before long the battalion was through the hills and approaching **Tripolis**.

From this junction town 6 Brigade, when its turn came, was to withdraw south-east to **Monemvasia**, but on 26 April any movement on

the road was south-west to the port of **Kalamata**. The headquarters group from the Reinforcement Battalion was therefore instructed by the military authorities in the town to continue south-west with the British and Australian convoys. This meant crossing another range to **Megalopolos** and continuing south across hills cloaked with bracken and stunted mountain oak to the plain of **Messinia**, a world of orange groves and cypress trees. Thereafter they skirted the eastern fringe, following the highway lined with aloes and cactus plants and finally turning eastwards over a slight rise to the town and port of **Kalamata**. The majority of the convoys went through to the eastern olive groves but the trucks of the Reinforcement Battalion, arriving late that afternoon and all through the night, assembled under cover several miles to the north.

In the town itself there were other detachments of New Zealanders. Lieutenants **Wilder**,² **Simpson**³ and **Watt**,⁴ all attached to Headquarters **80 Base Sub-area**, had travelled south with that

¹ See pp. 406– 7.

² **Lt-Col N. P. Wilder**, DSO; **Waipukurau**; born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; patrol commander LRDG; CO 2 NZ Div Cav, 1944; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

³ **Capt E. H. Simpson**; **Marton**; born Marton, 11 Feb 1908; farmer; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

⁴ **Capt T. N. S. Watt**, ED; **New Plymouth**; born Riversdale, 22 May 1912; school-teacher; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

organisation. The misdirected platoons¹ from 24 Battalion had come through from **Tripolis**. Second-Lieutenant **Reed**² and F Troop 30 Battery 6 Field Regiment had had a similar and perhaps more interesting story. On its way south from **Thermopylae** the troop had been diverted by the traffic authorities at **Elefsis** to the **Navplion– Corinth** area

instead of eastwards to **Athens** and **Porto Rafti**. Once in the line of traffic the troop had gone on to **Kalamata**, where like the platoons from 24 Battalion it was quite independent of the Reinforcement Battalion.

In addition there were many New Zealanders who had, in the general confusion of the withdrawal, lost contact with their units. Some had moved south with the hospital cases after the bombing of the *Hellas* in **Piræus** harbour; others who came in late that night or early next morning had escaped from the **Corinth Canal** area. Among them were men from 28 (Maori) Battalion Bren-carrier platoon and remnants of the detachment sent from **Voula Camp** with Lieutenant J. S. Findlay to guard the **Khalkis** bridge. The latter had come south to embark at 'D' Beach east of **Athens**, but they had been switched west from **Elevisis** towards **Corinth** and after the parachute attack had continued south to **Kalamata**.

As yet there had been no official embarkation from this port, but the **Royal Air Force** group, acting independently and arriving from **Argos** on 24 April, had already sent 200 men in Sunderland flying boats to **Crete** and a still larger number in a 500-ton freighter to the island of Kithira.³ On the night of 25–26 April another Sunderland had been sent over but it crashed in the harbour. Next morning, however, the naval embarkation officer, Captain Clark- Hall, RN, arrived and the **Royal Air Force** personnel, mostly technical tradesmen, had been given priority when embarkation began that night.

The military units directed south by Army Movement Control had been collecting in the olive groves all through 25 and 26 April and now, under the command of Brigadier L. P. Parrington, MC, there were about 16,000 men: **Allen Group** (16 and 17 Australian Brigades and Corps troops), many detachments of base troops, Palestinians and Cypriot labourers, Yugoslav soldiers and refugees, Indian mule drivers and Lascar seamen.

That night, 26–27 April, 8000 of them, including the majority of the Australians, were evacuated in the transports *Dilwarra*, *City of London*

and *Costa Rica*. Escorting them were the destroyers *Phoebe*,

¹ See pp. 425– 6.

² *Maj C. K. Reed, DSO, m.i.d.; Napier; born Tolaga Bay, 3 Mar 1915; bank clerk; 6 Fd Regt 1941–45; 2 i/c 4 Fd Regt Feb–Jul 1945; wounded 1 Dec 1941.*

³ See p. 446 for their evacuation, together with the groups which had reached there from the port of *Yithion*.

Flamingo, Hero, Hereward and *Defender*, the last named taking 250 men and the crown jewels of *Yugoslavia*. Next morning the ships became part of convoy GA 14 ¹ which sailed direct to *Alexandria*.

Left behind were 8000 men, mostly from base units except for 380 Australians under Lieutenant-Colonel H. G. F. Harlock, 50 men from 3 Royal Tank Regiment who had been manning Royal Air Force trucks and helping stragglers to the beaches south of *Corinth*, the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion immediately outside the town, and the 300 men from 4 *Hussars* who had completed their journey from the Gulf of *Corinth* and were now the rearguard 20 miles to the north. As a fighting force the group was not strong but Brigadier Parrington, the area commander, assured the senior officers that embarkation was possible that night. So the men did their best to endure another day's bombing and strafing before assembling on the beaches to the east of the town.

After dark on 27 April the groups were on the move, the Reinforcement Battalion taking its vehicles through the town to the assembly area near the junction of the Beach road and that lane from the north which the authorities called the Link road. ² From there the Australians had marched back to the harbour to embark in the destroyers which transferred them to the transports lying off shore. Expecting similar procedure, the columns moved hopefully along the Beach road towards the harbour between the great curving mole to the

west and the breakwater to the east. Inset into the waterfront were several landing stages and then the inner basin. To the north, across the open waterfront with its tramline and its garden plots, were the solidly constructed buildings of the business area, the side streets and the railway from the ancient town to the modern port.

The patient columns waited until midnight, when they were told that there would be no embarkation. Many of the men returned to their unit areas, but those who had wrecked their trucks and those who were weary because of long journeys and the strain of air raids took refuge in the nearby olive groves. The majority of the Reinforcement Battalion seem to have returned to their area beside the road and to the north of the town.

¹ See pp. 430– 1.

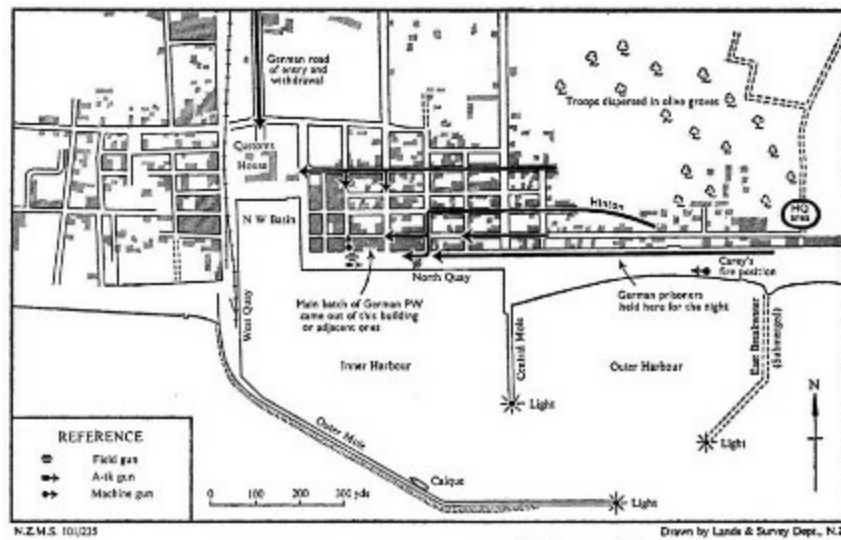
² Link road ran north-south and connected the **Sparta** and **Beach** roads.

TO GREECE

THE GERMAN ADVANCED GUARD ENTERS KALAMATA

The German Advanced Guard enters Kalamata

The next day, 28 April, saw more air raids and more casualties, until by nightfall there were 200 military wounded in the Greek hospital. The rumours of the parachute landings about the **Corinth**



THE BATTLE FOR KALAMATA WATERFRONT, 28-29 APRIL 1941

Canal had been confirmed the previous evening, but at 4 p.m. 4 Hussars reported that there were as yet no signs of the approaching enemy. Nevertheless Major MacDuff, when he reported that afternoon to Brigadier Parrington, was instructed to cover the embarkation. The men were already on their way to the assembly areas of the previous night, but MacDuff decided that A Company could cover the approaches to the waterfront from the north and B Company the **Sparta** road which extended eastwards from the town.

The plan was never put into operation. The outer screen of 4 Hussars had already been overwhelmed by the advanced guard of **5 Panzer Division**, which was now hurrying south from the canal area. No warning could be given to the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion; in

any case, the majority of that unit had already moved into **Kalamata**. But the covering party, including Captains Yates and **Bryson**¹ and Lieutenant Curtis, who were waiting for stragglers, and Major **Thomson**,² who was attending to some wounded, was surprised and captured. Several men attempted to break away. Some were successful, but the majority were checked by bursts of machine-gun fire and soon marched back to join **4 Hussars** in the open trucks at the end of the column. The force then moved on, Major Thomson accompanying the German medical officer. Meeting with no opposition and capturing still more prisoners, the Germans entered the town, crossed the bridge over the dry creek and turned south to the harbour, where they drew up near the Customs House. The prisoners were hustled off the vehicles and placed under guard; the Germans, obviously surprised at the number of soldiers about the town, began to probe eastwards along the waterfront.

Just how much time they had to establish themselves before darkness came down it is now impossible to estimate. The important fact was that there had been no serious opposition. The majority of the Allied troops were already to the east of the town; the rest were drifting along the tracks and side roads to the assembly areas. There had certainly been some intermittent rifle fire, but that had been common enough during the day and caused no inquiry. The result was that still more men were surprised and captured.

The greatest misfortune of all was the capture of Captain Clark-Hall, who, with his signalman, had been about to go down to the waterfront. Thereafter the difficulty of communicating with the **Navy** was to be the vital problem of the evacuation.

¹ **Capt C. D. Bryson**, ED; **Sydney**; born **Auckland**, 22 Sep 1904; accountant; p.w. Apr 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.

² **Maj G. H. Thomson**, OBE, ED; **New Plymouth**; born **Dunedin**, 5 Mar 1892; obstetrician; gunner, 4 How Bty, Egypt and **Gallipoli**, 1914–16; **RMO 4 Fd Regt** Sep 1939–Apr 1941; p.w. 29 Apr 1941;

repatriated Oct 1943.

Two New Zealand officers, Lieutenant **Daniel** ¹ and Second-Lieutenant **Willis**, ² after bringing their men to the waterfront, had gone to MacDuff's headquarters near the junction of Link and Beach roads. On their way back along one of the side streets they saw grey-uniformed soldiers in the distance but thought that they were some of the Yugoslavs—until a German had appeared from a doorway with an automatic and marched them back to the Customs House area, already packed with prisoners, lorries and AFVs.

The Germans had by then realised that they were in great danger. They questioned prisoners about the arrival of the convoy; they wanted to know how many men were at the other end of the waterfront and when there were signs of a counter-attack they became very disturbed. The prisoners were then marched back towards the town, across the bridge and along the highway to the waiting vehicles of the main body.

While this was taking place, the arrival of the enemy force had become known to the thousands assembled in the olive groves.

When the first reports reached the different headquarters the senior officers had been inclined to doubt the nerve of their informants. But a liaison officer ordered back to **4 Hussars** returned to say that the road through the town was blocked by the enemy; lorry drivers rushed back from the hospital area calling out that there were Germans in the town; more regular bursts of machine-gun fire were heard; and men could be seen running back to the safety of the olive groves.

The next stage of the action cannot be told in exact detail but the first serious opposition seems to have come from Major B. Carey, 3 Royal Tank Regiment, who with Major Pemberton, Royal Signals, had been walking towards the harbour when excited men had rushed back along the waterfront. Pemberton went back to warn Brigadier Parrington. Carey, collecting a Bren gun, spent the next two hours on the seaward side of the Beach road firing at the German guns on the quay and

encouraging those among the Allied soldiers who wished to fight.

About the same time Lieutenant-Colonel H. H. E. Geddes, Royal **Army Service Corps**, and Lieutenant-Colonel J. P. Robinson, 8 Hussars, had been approaching the waterfront. The bursts of machine-gun fire and the reports from men running back for shelter soon convinced them that the enemy had reached the quay. They decided that paratroops must have landed; neither thought that the enemy could have driven down the highway and through **Kalamata**. Geddes went forward with what troops he could collect, joined

¹ **Capt M. E. Daniel**; born NZ 25 Apr 1916; clerk; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

² **Capt H. F. Willis**; **Auckland**; born Kirkee, **India**, 7 Sep 1919; student; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

Carey and learnt something of the German positions. Then he returned to the olive groves and from there organised parties to clear the streets inland from and parallel to the waterfront. The majority were New Zealand, Australian and British troops, some led by non-commissioned officers, others by officers.

The small Australian force, though short of weapons, was equally active. Lieutenant-Colonel Harlock organised parties while Captain A. W. Gray sent one platoon with the New Zealand groups and led another along the waterfront.

The other source of resistance—probably the major one—was the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion, whose headquarters had been established by Major MacDuff at the junction of the Link and Beach roads. Before the fighting actually started, Lieutenants O'Rorke ¹ and **Rhind** ² had been sent to see that the covering companies went into position. On their instructions Captain **Simmonds**, ³ with men from B Company, Lieutenant D. R. Brickell and his platoon, and Lieutenant J.

W. Moodie from Battalion Headquarters moved back to cover the Sparta road and the eastern exit from the town. Warned by lorry loads of troops yelling 'Jerries in town' and by Greeks who called out 'Germania', the group reached the crossroads 'on the run'. Directed by Moodie, who knew the latest technique of street fighting, they had pulled down stone walls and prepared a defence post. At the same time Lieutenant F. G. Spackman had been sent forward by Major MacDuff to find out who was responsible for the bursts of rifle fire: 'if Greeks to shut them up; if Germans to find out where they were.' At the bridge he collected a German car, the disturbed occupant of which was taken back to the beach for cross-examination. Soon afterwards a truck drawing a heavy gun and then a motor lorry had approached the road block, but bursts of fire had forced their drivers to swing hurriedly away. Thereafter the group was not disturbed; heavy fighting could be heard about the harbour, but it eventually died down and about midnight the men were ordered back to the beaches, where the crowds were assembling for the expected embarkation.

Meanwhile O'Rorke and Rhind, when moving towards the centre of the town, had heard bursts of fire and seen Germans in the area to the west where A Company was to have been placed. They had returned to the road junction, collected about twenty New Zealanders and Australians, and moved towards the enemy, Rhind along the waterfront, O'Rorke one street inland.

¹ **Lt F. O'Rorke; born England, 31 Jul 1906; sheep-farmer; killed in action 28 Apr 1941.**

² **Capt P. K. Rhind; Christchurch; born Lyttelton, 20 Jun 1915; clerk; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; joined Regular Force; Area Commander, Christchurch, 1952-55.**

³ **Capt K. Simmonds; Dunedin; born England, 15 Mar 1907; factory manager; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

By then the light was fading and there was hopeless confusion in the thickly packed olive groves. If a soldier wished to fight he could do so—if he hesitated it was simple enough to remain among the excited thousands. Nevertheless, through the efforts of Geddes, Harlock and MacDuff, several parties had already moved off or were about to do so. The officers and men did not always know each other so it is impossible to record the names of many who took part in the actual fighting. But it is known that from this area patrols went in led by Lieutenants Canavan,¹ Simpson, Watt, Davies,² Buckleton,³ Fay⁴ and Harris.⁵ Moving through the eastern outskirts of the town, they reached the back streets and approached the quay from the north.

Ahead of these parties, however, was another collected and led by Sergeant Hinton,⁶ 20 Battalion. At the sound of firing he had gone to the headquarters corner and attempted to find out what was happening. Unable to get any response in the general confusion, he had moved along the Beach road towards the town and had then crawled across to Major Carey's gun post near the beach. With Carey's assurance of covering fire he had returned, collected about a dozen New Zealanders and started up the road to deal with the big gun which had just opened up. When machine-gun fire became too heavy, the party turned north up a side street and then went forward again a block or two inland from the waterfront. In this street Hinton dealt with a machine-gun post set up at a corner to cover the eastern and northern approaches.

At this stage there seems to have been a pause in the advance. The parties organised by MacDuff were coming in from the side streets to give their support but the scene was incredibly confusing. All was dark except for the streams of tracer bullets and the sudden clarity after a flare went up; mortar bombs were exploding; stray Germans hidden in the doorways opened fire, wounding several men, including O'Rorke and Sergeant Hesson;⁷ and, most important of all, there was no overall command. In spite of these difficulties the attack was soon switched south towards the waterfront. Canavan and an Australian sergeant with their group covered the street in

¹ **Capt W. A. O'N. Canavan, m.i.d.; born Blenheim, 19 Dec 1908; school-teacher; p.w Apr 1941; died 7 Aug 1955.**

² **Capt R. Davies; born Newport, Wales, 20 Oct 1912; engineer fitter; p.w. Apr 1941; died of wounds while p.w. 21 Apr 1945.**

³ **Capt J. G. Buckleton, m.i.d.; born Auckland, 15 Jul 1908; sharebroker; p.w. Apr 1941.**

⁴ **Capt J. A. O'L. Fay; Auckland; born Wellington, 29 Jun 1912; insurance inspector; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

⁵ **Capt H. R. Harris, ED; Wellington; born Wellington, 24 May 1907; company manager; wounded and p.w. 28 Apr 1941.**

⁶ **Sgt J. D. Hinton, VC, m.i.d.; Templeton; born Riverton, 17 Sep 1909; driver; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

⁷ **Sgt J. Hesson; born NZ 18 Nov 1918; farmer; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943; died Alexandra, 10 Jul 1948.**

which the German supply trucks were drawn up. Hinton, supported by covering fire from Private **A. M. Jones**, ¹ moved down another street, dealing with machine-gun posts and reaching the waterfront near the more forward of the two heavy guns.

Meanwhile Rhind, with the supporting fire from Carey's group along the Beach road, had led his party from block to block along the waterfront until it met those coming in from the side streets. They were reorganising when 'a truck went up the road towards the German positions, loaded with N.Z. and Australian troops.'²

This truck, driven by Sapper **Gourlick** ³ with eight men aboard,

including Privates **Snooks**,⁴ **Turner**⁵ and **Lewis**,⁶ had been sent in by MacDuff. At some speed it had been rattled along from the olive groves, turned on to the waterfront and rushed forward to within 50 yards of the first gun. There it had been pulled up sharply, the crew dashing to cover up the nearest side street and opening fire on the Germans about the gun and along the open pavement of the quay. Their fire, Hinton's advance from the side street and, most probably, the never-ceasing machine-gun fire from Carey forced the gun crews to seek refuge in the buildings along the waterfront. Behind them they left the biggest collection of killed and wounded seen by any of those who took part in the action.

Thereafter the fighting was along the waterfront, from one block of buildings to another, the Germans withdrawing and leaving to the British the RAP set up by their captive, Major Thomson. Hinton, Jones and other members of the advance parties were wounded but reserves were hastening forward from the olive groves. They may have approached according to plan for Captain G. A. F. Kennard⁷ of **4 Hussars**, who had escaped from the Customs House area, had given MacDuff some useful information about the German strength and positions. But the actual fighting went on as before, without any direction whatsoever. Nevertheless it was spontaneous and irresistible. Some men broke into the buildings, others darted from

¹ **Pte A. M. Jones; Invercargill; born Greymouth, 13 Jul 1917; bricklayer; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

² Information from Captain Rhind to D. J. C. Pringle (co-author 20 Battalion history); Major F. B. Topham; notes from Gourlick, Lewis, Snooks and Turner.

³ **Spr W. P. Gourlick, MM; Mosgiel Junction; born NZ 11 Mar 1905; engineer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

⁴ **Pte C. Snooks; Taupo; born Waitara, 13 Jul 1916; butcher;**

p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁵ Pte W. G. Turner; Lyttelton; born NZ 27 Sep 1906; labourer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁶ Pte O. R. Lewis; born NZ 17 Sep 1903; mechanic; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

⁷ This officer, who had been captured outside the town, had 'filed off' when the fighting began and taken cover until he met a New Zealand officer, with whom he 'doubled back' to MacDuff's headquarters.

place to place, returning the bursts of fire that were coming from the windows and balconies of the last buildings overlooking the almost open waterfront.

No account of the initial stages of the surrender was prepared by the British. Members of the different groups very often did not know each other and within a few hours they themselves were to be taken prisoners of war. In a German propaganda publication ¹ there is, however, an account which more or less agrees with the reports of those who are known to have been in the immediate vicinity. The details are not always accurate, but the personal reference to at least one British officer suggests that the author had interviewed German officers who had taken part in the action.

According to him one of the British had called upon the Germans to surrender. A lieutenant had replied, 'Fire stopping—finished', and had then been sent over with instructions not to surrender but to make a parley: 'We haven't a shot left. Gain time.' He had been forced to call over his company commander, but the 'Australians' had threatened to shoot both Germans 'unless within five minutes all encircled in the harbour laid down their arms.' At this stage an 'English Colonel' ² arrived and conducted the negotiations. The Germans probably

mentioned the force outside the town and the hopelessness of the situation so far as the British were concerned, for they record that ‘The wild fellows ... bellowed with indignation.’ And that seems to have decided the case for by midnight the Germans had surrendered to whoever happened to be near and the final number was over 120 all ranks.

Their casualties had been heavy, particularly about the more forward of the two heavy guns and in one of the side streets where ‘somebody must have caught them with a bren.’³ In all there were 41 killed and 60 wounded. The British casualties were 3 officers and 30 other ranks killed and 50 or more wounded, who were cared for ‘in what was called a British Hospital where a New Zealand doctor⁴ was doing magnificent work with negligible equipment.’

The chances of evacuation now seemed to be good. Barriers were erected to control the roads, parties were detailed to hold them and efforts were made to signal the **Navy**.

The cruisers *Perth* and *Phoebe* and the destroyers *Nubian*, *Defender*, *Hereward*, *Decoy*, *Hasty* and *Hero* were already approaching the harbour. The last named had been sent ahead to make contact with the shore and at 8.45 p.m., using lamp signals,

¹ *From Serbia to Crete*, translated by the **War History Branch**.

² Just who this was it is now impossible to say.

³ It has not been possible to find out who was responsible for these casualties.

⁴ Major Thomson.

Brigadier Parrington had told its commander that the Germans were

in the town. An attempt to recapture the quay was already being undertaken. This was passed on to the *Perth* whose captain, Bowyer-Smith, ¹ was senior officer of the squadron. The *Hero* nosed her way closer to the beach, her first lieutenant went ashore and a review of the situation was wirelessly to the *Perth*. Soon afterwards, at 9.30 p.m., he reported that the beach was suitable for evacuation and the following signal was sent to the *Perth*, but owing to wireless defects it was not received until 10.11 p.m.:

Troops collecting on beach south-east of town. All firing ceased in town. Consider evacuation possible from beach. Brigadier is reporting.

By then Bowyer-Smith, acting on the earlier signals and observing fires and explosions ashore, had at 9.29 p.m. abandoned the operation and was moving south with all ships except the *Hero*. He did not alter his decision.

As the *Hero* had only two whalers the chances of embarkation were very limited. But the naval authorities in *Crete*, having been told that there were 1500 Yugoslavs and thousands of troops still in *Kalamata*, had sent over the *Kandahar*, *Kingston* and *Kimberley* to assist the original force. These destroyers arrived at 1 a.m. and more embarkation was possible. The sick and wounded from the hospital and the men wounded in the town had by then been taken to the beach, but there was still a shortage of boats and very little available time. So in the end only 332 all ranks were evacuated. As some fit men, including several New Zealanders, were among that number, it is regrettable that the majority of those who did the actual fighting were not evacuated. They saw the last boat leave the beach and were told that it would be back again. But it never appeared. The destroyers moved out about 3 a.m., signalling 'Many regrets' several times. The disappointed troops, unable to understand the departure of the ships, found their own solution and accepted the often repeated and quite incorrect rumour that the approach of an Italian fleet made it necessary for the destroyers to get clear of the coast.

The Brigadier then had the unpleasant task of calling his senior officers together and informing them of their hopeless situation. Any further resistance was considered impossible and unnecessary. Calls were made for any officer who could speak German and Captain Kennard was sent back with his German officer to say that the force would surrender before daybreak. Next morning swastikas were spread out on the beaches as a warning to the *Luftwaffe* to cease its bombing; the troops were assembled by the now exultant Germans; and for several days trainloads of prisoners were taken north to **Corinth and to four unhappy years as prisoners of war.**

¹ **Captain Sir Philip Bowyer-Smith, RN.**

TO GREECE

THE GERMAN ACCOUNT OF THE ACTION AT KALAMATA

The German Account of the Action at Kalamata

The only official German report of the action, the propaganda publication already quoted, gives few details: there had been a 'violent engagement' and 7000 British troops had surrendered. According to this booklet, one company from *5 Panzer Division* had approached **Kalamata** about 6.30 p.m., collecting 'little groups of stranded Tommies' on the way and entering the town. 'Things were quiet' so the force carried on to the waterfront. There was still no movement. Then about 7 p.m. rifle fire 'began to crackle ... isolated shots at first, so that nobody bothered', but suddenly it increased in volume, the British 'sweeping the long quay with their fire.' One of the three armoured vehicles was put out of action and had to be shepherded into cover by the other two; the prisoners were sent back to the main body which was now outside the town; and the company prepared for all-round defence.

On the waterfront two machine guns and three PAK guns ¹ returned the fire and the motorised battery of two 15-centimetre guns went into action, firing over open sights in the direction of the olive groves. All British accounts state that only two shells came over, but the Germans describe how the twelve gunners worked with 'furious calm' until eight of them had fallen to the British fire. The machine-gunners, equally exposed, had their casualties, resistance slackened, and before long the British were appearing out of 'each side street and lane'. The German commander, collecting his men, made a last stand in some buildings towards the southern end of the waterfront. But they were 'shut in from all sides', and when their ammunition was exhausted they asked for a parley and were forced to surrender.

The enemy prisoners were marched back to the beach where British officers 'wrapped in their greatcoats' were waiting for the expected convoy. It did not appear, and about 4 a.m. on 29 April a British officer

asked the captured company commander to take him as envoy to the highest-ranking German officer outside the town. So back they went to the battalion commander and the 450 men who were 'waiting with unspeakable impatience for the dawn.' The surrender was soon negotiated, the *Luftwaffe* was warned not to bomb the area and at dawn the British became prisoners of war.

¹ *Panzerabwehrkanone*: anti-tank gun.

TO GREECE

ESCAPE PARTIES

Escape Parties

Nevertheless, many officers and men had already escaped or were attempting to escape. ² The first to make the effort were twenty-two

² Some RAF personnel had already been evacuated from **Yithion** and **Kalamata** in Sunderland aircraft. Another party at **Kardhamili**, a village some 20 miles south-east of **Kalamata**, left in a motor vessel for **Crete**.—See A. S. G. Lee, *Special Duties*, pp. 95–105. After the surrender of the main body many British officers and men rushed off by truck or on foot towards this village or the nearby coast, from which on succeeding nights some were collected by the **Navy**.

men who had dashed off into the olive groves and avoided capture when the German columns surprised the New Zealand companies outside **Kalamata**. Reaching the coast just west of the town and hearing the sound of the fighting, they made plans to reach the embarkation beach. Acquiring three small boats they set off, ten in one and six in each of the other two. The largest boat and one of the smaller ones successfully reached the eastern shores of the bay, where they were joined by another boat from **Kalamata**. Once again assisted by the Greeks, they made plans for a voyage to **Crete** and sailed that night, 29–30 April. The two small boats soon left the biggest one behind and their history is not known exactly. The big boat with its crew of ten ¹ carried on all the next day using makeshift sails, a map 'on the cover of a Greek-English conversation book' and the compass on the top of a fountain pen. That night the party was picked up by the *Isis*, one of the flotilla of destroyers sent over from **Crete** to collect any survivors.

The boat which failed to cross the bay on the first night had finished up some ten miles down the coast from **Kalamata**. Inland there were

German units, but the Greeks gave assistance and Lieutenant **Poolman**,² with five men, waited hoping to see ships come in to collect troops. At this stage they were joined by seven men who had escaped from **Kalamata** after the surrender. The combined groups, less three men who preferred other risks, finally sailed for **Crete** on 30 April, crossing the bay and by stages sailing down the coast to **Cape Matapan**. On the way they were joined by some of the men from one of the two smaller boats and on 8 May, by sailing south-east to Kithira and Katra, they reached the port of **Kastelli** in **Crete**.

The rear party of the **Royal Air Force** had a different history. Disappointed at the non-appearance of warships or Sunderlands during the night of 27–28 April, they had on 28 April moved to Kardhamili, a coastal village across the bay and about 20 miles south of **Kalamata**. A 30-foot motor boat had been chartered and all preparations made for a move that night. So when a motorcyclist brought the news of the German entry into **Kalamata**, the party left in daylight, creeping down the coast to **Cape Matapan** and eventually reaching Kithira and, on 30 April, **Suda Bay** in **Crete**.

Other parties did their best to escape from the town itself after Brigadier Parrington announced that they would not be taken off by the **Navy**. In the darkness and confusion of that night it was not easy to find boats and many made off along the coast to the east. Some got away far enough to avoid capture next morning and

¹ Second-Lieutenant J. Rose and nine other ranks, including ‘the skipper [Sgt C. West, **20 Bn**] who comes from the oyster beds of the Bluff, New Zealand.’

² Maj F. H. Poolman, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Whangarei**; born Greenmeadows, 11 Jan 1905; Govt rural valuer; sqn comd and 2 i/c Div Cav 1944; twice wounded.

to be picked up by the **Navy** on the following two nights, but the

majority of those who kept to the land were eventually captured. ¹

Those who found small boats were usually more successful. Private **Patterson** ² (20 Battalion) and a Maori found a dinghy, put to sea and were picked up by one of the destroyers. Lieutenant E. H. Simpson, after taking part in the recapture of the town, was sent out from the beach with a small party in a rowing boat to contact the destroyers vaguely to be seen off shore. The ships left soon afterwards and the soldiers, using their packing case paddles, were forced to land down the coast. Next night they moved off shore, used the cordite from cartridge cases to make flares and were picked up by HMS *Isis*.

The more fortunate groups were able to find seaworthy vessels. Sergeant **Grimmond** ³ (24 Battalion) and seven others seized a caique and Grimmond navigated it to **Crete**. ⁴

Another caique was taken out by the men ⁵ from 6 Field Regiment who had reached **Kalamata** quite independent of the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion. Not confident of getting away, Lieutenant Reed and his party had been encouraged by Gunner **McKenzie** ⁶ to arrange for their own evacuation. During the morning they had found a caique anchored well out from the mole and had left Sergeants **Fenton** ⁷ and **Lydster** ⁸ and Gunner **Hodgetts** ⁹ to prepare her for the open sea and to keep guard over her until nightfall. Unfortunately for them the Germans arrived just before dark, came along the mole and took the caretakers back to join the prisoners near the Customs House. The other members of the party, after the counter-attack and the announcement that there would be no evacuation, returned to the caique, took aboard the supplies McKenzie had collected, and remained hidden all through 29 April—not smoking, not talking, very hot and sometimes worried by the sound of German voices. No investigation was made, however, and when darkness came two men used the rowing boat and towed the caique beyond the mole and out to sea. They then made their way down the coast and across to **Crete**, where they landed on 7 May.

¹ Sergeant A. V. D. Flett and Private D. W. Donald of 24 Battalion were at large in Greece for over a year before being caught.

² Pte D. D. Patterson; Invercargill; born Glencoe, 24 Nov 1916; machinist; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

³ Sgt A. J. Grimmond, BEM; Auckland; born Australia, 9 Dec 1910; plasterer.

⁴ R. M. Burdon, 24 Battalion, p. 48.

⁵ See p. 450.

⁶ L-Bdr N. G. McKenzie; Wellington; born NZ 12 Feb 1911; commercial traveller; p.w. Dec 1941.

⁷ Sgt F. T. Fenton; Te Puke; born Auckland, 15 Sep 1913; solicitor; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

⁸ Sgt N. R. Lydster; born NZ 10 Nov 1918; cashier; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

⁹ Gnr W. G. Hodgetts; Gore; born NZ 14 Jul 1904; driver; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

The Navy had in the meantime kept its promise to return. On 29–30 April, the night after the fighting, the destroyers *Isis*, *Hero* and *Kimberley* came over from Crete and picked up along the coast to the east of Kalamata some 16 officers and 17 other ranks, mainly from English units. The following night, 30 April–1 May, they were more successful, collecting 23 officers and 178 other ranks. And from Milos the *Hotspur* and *Havock* evacuated some 700 British and Palestinian

troops who had reached that island from parts of **Greece** other than **Kalamata**.

Thereafter, until the airborne attack on 20 May, small parties made their way to **Crete**. Sometimes names were recorded, but very often the records were left behind on that island. The only reference may be a cable from **Crete** to New Zealand Headquarters in Egypt such as 'Arrived **Crete** 14 May 13 other ranks'; a note that on 4 May forty arrived from **Crete**, 'mostly New Zealanders', who had been guarding the Shell Oil refinery; or the name of a Maori who had been captured at **Kalamata** and who by some unstated means had managed to escape. Sometimes those who reached **Crete** rejoined their units, took part in the fighting and were then killed or captured. The **Mobile Dental Unit**, for instance, records that Driver **Ferris**¹ escaped by small boat but was compelled to return to land for ten to fourteen days. There he met Drivers **Easton**² and **Craig**,³ who had been captured at **Kalamata** but had escaped and made their way through to the coast. Joining forces with eight other fugitives and securing a small boat, they reached **Crete** some days before the air attack. The survivors from the fighting joined in the march over the hills to the evacuation beaches, but several 'have not yet reported.'⁴ Such a note in many of the war diaries for the **Crete** campaign explains why there are so many gaps in the history of the last few days in **Greece**.

¹ **Dvr W. W. Ferris**; Dunedin; born **Oamaru**, 16 Dec 1914; driver.

² **Dvr J. Easton**; **Oamaru**; born **Invercargill**, 13 Oct 1908; butcher; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; escaped to **Crete**; recaptured 1 Jun 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

³ **Dvr J. C. Craig**; Westport; born Westport, 23 Jan 1910; service-car driver; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; escaped to **Crete**; recaptured 1 Jun 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

⁴ War diary of **ADDS**, **NZ Dental Corps**, May 1941, Appx VI.

TO GREECE

CHAPTER 22 – 2 NZEF IN NORTH AFRICA, APRIL-MAY 1941

CHAPTER 22

2 NZEF in North Africa, April-May 1941

Maadi and Helwan Camps

THE month of May was notable for movements to and from Egypt. On 2 May 6 Brigade Group returned from **Greece**; Headquarters New Zealand Artillery, 6 Field Company and 1 Survey Troop were brought over from **Crete** on 9 May; the Ammunition Company, the Supply Column and detachments of signallers on 14 May; and the **5th Reinforcements** and 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, which had left **Wellington** on 7 April, arrived on 13 May. The immediate problem was the equipment and reorganisation of these troops.

At the same time there was movement away from Egypt. The **Kiwi Concert Party** and the bands of 4 and 5 Brigades left for **Crete** on 11 May and a detachment from the Composite Training Depot went from **Port Tewfik** to **Durban** as guard for prisoners of war in the *Dunera*.

New Zealand Units in the Desert

The other New Zealanders in Egypt were the railway construction and operating units that had been withdrawn in February from the **Western Desert** to the Canal Zone. Docks, depots and railways were to be surveyed by 9 Survey Company and constructed in the northern sub-area by 10 Railway Construction Company and in the southern sub-area by 13 Railway Construction Company.

In this work 10 Company did not take a very active part; it suffered from a most exasperating series of orders and counter-orders about service in **Greece**. In the first plan a composite company from all units was to go, then in March the company had to call in all detachments to **Qassasin**, hand over their tasks to 13 Company and prepare for service overseas with a section from 16 Railway Operating Company under command. The advance party left with the motor transport for **Amiriya** on its way to **Alexandria**, but the departure of the main body was

repeatedly postponed. The arrival of an Australian company ¹ to take over some of the work was encouraging but the return of the operating detachment to its own unit was ominous. April came and there were orders to move—on

¹ For a time 2 Australian Railway Construction Company came under the command of Group Headquarters so far as work was concerned.

the 15th, then on the 16th—and finally on 23 April an order to return to the **Western Desert**. On 2 May the company was back in the dust-storm about **El Daba** maintaining the line from Kilo 85 to **Mersa Matruh**.

Thirteenth Railway Construction Company had a much less disturbed existence. There had been no suggestion that the company should go to **Greece** as a complete unit, so February for its men was a month for the construction of sidings and depots along the Canal and for the completion of the different tasks begun by 10 Company before it assembled for its possible move to **Greece**. March and April saw no important changes; May came and the company was still in the furnace of the Canal Zone, laying new railway tracks and constructing a bridge over the Sweet Water Canal, a jetty and a marshalling yard at Agroud.

There were equally few changes for the railway operating companies. Sixteenth Company spent February and March controlling the line to **Mersa Matruh**; 17 Company remained in the Canal Zone operating the yards at **Geneifa** or attached to the stations along the main railway line.

But there were several small detachments that travelled a very long way from the Canal Zone. In February 1 officer and 72 other ranks were selected from the two operating companies for work at **Haifa** in **Palestine**. There they were employed overhauling railway stock and 'knocking 1914–18 locomotives into shape' for the Syrian campaign of July 1941.

Some detachments travelled 2400 miles to **Eritrea**, from which the Italians were now being expelled. On 26 February 9 Survey Company sent 2 officers and 18 other ranks to **Kassala** in eastern **Sudan**. From here they had driven 60 dusty miles to **Tessenei** and the granite foothills on the way to **Keren** and the central plateau of **Eritrea**. A railway line was then surveyed through the box thorn and up the arid wadis. With the temperature at 115 degrees F. in the shade at midday all work was done in the early morning; the cool evenings could be spent shooting gazelle or resting in camp watching the lights of the convoys bumping forward to the forces attacking **Keren**. This town fell on 27 March and the detachment left soon afterwards for Egypt.

The other detachment, 1 officer and 49 other ranks, came from 10 Railway Construction Company. They left the Canal Zone on 6 March to travel the same long route by railway, steamer, and motor lorry to **Kassala** and to **Tessenei**. Here they were attached to 10 Railway Construction Company, **Royal Engineers**, to work on the railway and on the Gash River bridge. In April they were attached to 101 Indian Railway Construction Company and remained with it until the bridge was completed towards the end of May. The detachment returned by way of **Port Sudan** and the **Red Sea** to join the rest of the company in the **Western Desert**.

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The detachment left **Alexandria** in a coastal vessel, landed at **Tobruk** and reached **Benghazi** by motor transport on 1 March. The metre gauge railway line was almost intact, complete with steam and diesel engines, carriages, wagons and an Arab operating staff of 150 men. Within three days they were running two trains each way each day, taking out Italian prisoners and returning with petrol and rations that had been landed at **Tobruk**.

The same week a small detachment, Sergeant Rinaldi ² and four railway engineers, was sent up from **Tobruk** to the harbour at **Derna**. Attached to Movement Control for duties on the wharves, they dealt with the small ships that were sent up with petrol.

This peacetime regularity lasted only a few weeks. The German High Command had already decided that the crumbling Italian defences in North Africa must be buttressed by the *Afrika Korps* and screened by the *Luftwaffe*. And to accentuate the problem some of the British and Australian units were being withdrawn for service in **Greece**; for those who remained there was also a shortage of armour and transport. The inevitable result of German strength and British weakness was a shattering series of disasters.

Rommel made the first move on 31 March when he crossed the border at **El Agheila** and forced **2 Armoured Division** to withdraw. This in turn led to the evacuation of **Benghazi**, the precipitate retreat from **Cyrenaica**, and in the end to the loss of almost all that had been won a few months before. By 12 April the Germans were in **Bardia** and approaching the frontier of Egypt.

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The only centre of resistance in their rear was **Tobruk**, which General Wavell had decided should be held in order to preserve the large supply dumps and to prevent Rommel using the port to support his advance into Egypt. Until the end of the year the siege of that town dominated the course of the war in North Africa.

In the retreat across **Cyrenaica** and in the defence of **Tobruk** itself only a few New Zealanders took part. On 3 April, when Rommel was approaching **Benghazi**, the detachment from 16 Railway Operating Company was given the task of transporting a pioneer battalion to **Barce**. The detachment stood-to all night, unrequired locomotives were destroyed and at 7 a.m. on 4 April it pulled out, reaching **Barce** with two trainloads that same afternoon. Here the locomotives were destroyed and the party was taken on to **Tobruk** by motor transport. Thence it went by ship to **Alexandria** as escort for several hundred Italian prisoners of war.

The Derna detachment, with orders to stay so long as there were vehicles requiring petrol, watched the main stream of vehicles go east and then destroyed all the remaining petrol. After that it was every man for himself. In their case they kept together, hitch-hiking their way back to the units in **Tobruk** only a few hours ahead of the German advanced guard.

About the same time a small detachment from 21 Mechanical Equipment Company was moving in the other direction. It was being hurried out from Egypt to **Tobruk**. The company had arrived on 23 March with the third section of the **4th Reinforcements**. Ten days later Second-Lieutenant **Bryant**¹ and four other ranks received orders to collect from the **Delta Barrage** mechanical shovels and rooters for delivery at **Barce**. This equipment, only partially assembled, was loaded on eight 10-ton trucks driven by Royal Army Service Corps drivers. They got as far as **Tobruk** on 8 April just before it was encircled by the **Afrika Korps**. The machines were hurriedly assembled and handed over to an Australian unit for the excavation of tank traps about the perimeter. The New Zealanders then waited for a ship to **Alexandria** and had their

first experience of intense air raids. The first ship they left on was bombed and had to be beached; the second had some near misses but reached **Alexandria** on 25 April. For speed of approach to the battlefield after arrival in the **Middle East**, this detachment's movement is probably the record for **2 NZEF**. Other detachments from the same company were sent with their heavy machinery to excavate anti-tank ditches at **Mersa Matruh** and **Baggush**.

The largest detachment of New Zealanders in the **Tobruk** area was composed of the seventy or more railwaymen who had worked

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In this work New Zealanders operated four tugs that brought in the lighters; others unloaded these stores or were concerned with the transportation of the wounded from the shore to the hospital ships. One man was killed in April but otherwise they were very fortunate. The only available diary kept by anyone in the unit is very brief but its plain matter-of-fact entries become very impressive. The tugs had to race out to pick up the survivors from sunken ships; a blazing oil tanker had to be towed to a disused jetty; lighters were towed alongside the wreckage of sunken ships to escape observation during an air raid; inland, German dive-bombers could on occasion be seen peeling off to attack gun positions. And so the saga went on until June, when the writer with

other railwaymen was recalled to **Alexandria** and to his company.

To the east of **Tobruk** the forward element of Rommel's army had come to a halt in April mid-way between the Egyptian border and **Mersa Matruh**, in front of a line held by British, Australian and Polish troops. Behind them in the **Cairo** Sub-area were Indian troops just back from **Eritrea** and brigades of Australians and New Zealanders who had returned from **Greece**. The situation was serious, somewhat similar to that of mid-1940 when the Italians had declared war and invaded Egypt. The men needed rest and reorganisation; supplies and equipment had been left in **Greece** or were needed in **Crete**. But there was one difference so far as the New Zealanders were concerned. In 1940 **2 NZEF** had been able to send 4 Brigade Group to the **Baggush Box**; in 1941 it had only a few non-fighting units available for immediate service in the desert.

Nevertheless on 10 April, when the situation was even more threatening— **Bardia** fell on the 13th— **General Freyberg** from **Greece** suggested to Mr Fraser in New Zealand that Wavell should be offered liberty of action to use to the best advantage the New Zealanders in Egypt. Officers and NCOs had been left at **Maadi** and, if the necessity arose, 'they could form an infantry brigade.'

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The same April crisis brought back into the **Western Desert** several units with useful desert experience. Sixteenth Railway Operating Company had left the desert railway on 28 March for **El Kirsh** in the Canal Zone. It was to take over the duties of 17 Railway Operating Company, then under orders for service in **Palestine**; plans were also under way for a detachment to work in **Eritrea**. But all these plans were dropped when Rommel recovered **Cyrenaica**. General Headquarters, **Middle East**, expecting the worst, had most of the company back on the

El Daba– Mersa Matruh railway early in April, only eleven days after it had handed it over to the Egyptian staff. The detachment that had been seconded for service in **Greece** with 10 Railway Construction Company remained at **Amiriya** in case the line to **Alexandria** was threatened or the forward units had to retire. If that had happened, 16 Railway Operating Company was to have controlled the whole 200 miles between **Mersa Matruh** and **Amiriya**. In the meantime the company ran more trains than previously, prepared a defence system at **El Daba** ‘with an all round field of fire’ and welcomed back its odd detachments, first that from **Benghazi**, then the Workshops section from **Syria**, the detachment which never went to **Eritrea** and finally the one which never left for **Greece**.

The newcomers to the desert were 18 Army Troops Company, which had arrived in Egypt with the third section of the 4th Reinforcements. Within a few days of its arrival the company was warned that it was to be responsible for the operation and maintenance of the desert water supply. In mid-April the company left **Maadi** for the **Western Desert** and became responsible for the pipeline from **Alexandria** to **Daba**, to **Mersa Matruh** and Charing Cross, for the supply of water in drums and for the operation of self-propelled water barges. This meant sections maintaining the pipeline, detachments on the water barges within the harbour of **Mersa Matruh** and small parties on the water ships ² *Myriel* and *Eocene* that ran between **Alexandria** and **Mersa Matruh**.

Thus, by the end of April 1941, **2 NZEF** was once more dispersed. Fourth and 5th Infantry Brigades and other units were in **Crete** waiting for the German attack; 6 Infantry Brigade was in

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Egypt reorganising after its return from Greece; the 4th Reinforcements and the base units were training in Maadi and Helwan camps; in the desert railwaymen and engineers were serving from Alexandria to Tobruk. The comparison can be extended still further by pointing out that in 1940 5 Infantry Brigade Group in Britain was waiting to repulse an invasion; in 1941 4 and 5 Infantry Brigade Groups were standing-to in Crete waiting for the parachute battalions.

TO GREECE

MAADI AND HELWAN CAMPS

Maadi and Helwan Camps

THE month of May was notable for movements to and from Egypt. On 2 May 6 Brigade Group returned from **Greece**; Headquarters New Zealand Artillery, 6 Field Company and 1 Survey Troop were brought over from **Crete** on 9 May; the Ammunition Company, the Supply Column and detachments of signallers on 14 May; and the **5th Reinforcements** and 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, which had left **Wellington** on 7 April, arrived on 13 May. The immediate problem was the equipment and reorganisation of these troops.

At the same time there was movement away from Egypt. The **Kiwi Concert Party** and the bands of 4 and 5 Brigades left for **Crete** on 11 May and a detachment from the Composite Training Depot went from **Port Tewfik** to **Durban** as guard for prisoners of war in the *Dunera*.

TO GREECE

NEW ZEALAND UNITS IN THE DESERT

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The other New Zealanders in Egypt were the railway construction and operating units that had been withdrawn in February from the **Western Desert** to the Canal Zone. Docks, depots and railways were to be surveyed by 9 Survey Company and constructed in the northern sub-area by 10 Railway Construction Company and in the southern sub-area by 13 Railway Construction Company.

In this work 10 Company did not take a very active part; it suffered from a most exasperating series of orders and counter-orders about service in **Greece**. In the first plan a composite company from all units was to go, then in March the company had to call in all detachments to Qassasin, hand over their tasks to 13 Company and prepare for service overseas with a section from 16 Railway Operating Company under command. The advance party left with the motor transport for **Amiriya** on its way to **Alexandria**, but the departure of the main body was repeatedly postponed. The arrival of an Australian company ¹ to take over some of the work was encouraging but the return of the operating detachment to its own unit was ominous. April came and there were orders to move—on

¹ For a time 2 Australian Railway Construction Company came under the command of Group Headquarters so far as work was concerned.

the 15th, then on the 16th—and finally on 23 April an order to return to the **Western Desert**. On 2 May the company was back in the dust-storm about **El Daba** maintaining the line from Kilo 85 to **Mersa Matruh**.

Thirteenth Railway Construction Company had a much less disturbed existence. There had been no suggestion that the company should go to Greece as a complete unit, so February for its men was a month for the construction of sidings and depots along the Canal and for the completion of the different tasks begun by 10 Company before it assembled for its possible move to Greece. March and April saw no important changes; May came and the company was still in the furnace of the Canal Zone, laying new railway tracks and constructing a bridge over the Sweet Water Canal, a jetty and a marshalling yard at Agroud.

There were equally few changes for the railway operating companies. Sixteenth Company spent February and March controlling the line to Mersa Matruh; 17 Company remained in the Canal Zone operating the yards at Geneifa or attached to the stations along the main railway line.

But there were several small detachments that travelled a very long way from the Canal Zone. In February 1 officer and 72 other ranks were selected from the two operating companies for work at Haifa in Palestine. There they were employed overhauling railway stock and 'knocking 1914–18 locomotives into shape' for the Syrian campaign of July 1941.

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TO GREECE

CHAPTER 23 – CONCLUSION

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The Problems of the Campaign

THE weakness ¹ of the Greek Army, the small Imperial force available, the inadequate port, road and railway facilities, the difficulties already facing the **Navy** and the Air Force, and the lack of information about Yugoslav plans for mobilisation and deployment had all been known to the service chiefs when they decided to despatch **W Force** to **Greece**. Such risks had to be faced, otherwise **Britain** would not have been able to influence, in any appreciable manner, **Hitler's** movements in south-east **Europe**.

But there were, during the campaign itself, many unexpected problems. The Greeks had been unwilling to have their roads, ports and railway facilities wrecked beyond repair. Of the demolitions effected, those in the **Platamon** tunnel were the most successful because they blocked for some weeks the movement of railway traffic between **Athens** and **Salonika**, but in other areas the demolitions halted the enemy for only short periods. And in the Peloponnese little or no effort was made to isolate the embarkation areas; in fact the *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division*, when it crossed to Patrai, found the railway system in working order and was able, by assembling two trains, to rush troops south to **Kalamata**. This had actually been unnecessary. The advanced guard of *5 Panzer Division*, using the undamaged highway south of **Corinth**, had already arrived and captured ² the thousands assembled there for embarkation.

Immediately after the campaign the results of this policy were still more evident. In the preparations for the attack upon **Crete** the Germans used the petrol installations at **Piræus**, the docking facilities at all ports, Radio Station **Athens**—the only **Balkan** station which could be used as a beacon for aircraft operations over **Crete**—long stretches of the railway system, all the airfields and, most important of all, the **Corinth Canal**. The wreckage from the bridge had certainly delayed the

movement from the Adriatic of the vessels carrying petrol for the *Luftwaffe*, but divers with special equipment

¹ On 7 February 1941 No. 27 Military Mission reported that as **Yugoslavia** and **Turkey** did not appear willing to resist, and as Great Britain had not the necessary resources, any Greek aggression would be more like a political gesture than a military operation. See pp. 151– 2 for conditions in **Greece**.

² See p. 453.

had been flown down from **Kiel** and the canal had been successfully cleared. All the same, had the delay lasted any longer the attack upon **Crete** would have been postponed. Consequently it is to be regretted that the British, with their respect for the wishes of the Greeks, did not block the canal as thoroughly as did the Germans later when they, in their turn, were forced to withdraw.

Just as important was the failure to demolish ¹ some of the great bridges to the north, more particularly the one in the Asopos Gorge. Once the minor bridges were replaced and the **Platamon** tunnel was cleared, troops and supplies came south by rail to **Piráus** and from there were shipped to North Africa. Specially selected and carefully trained units had therefore to be sent over to **Greece** in 1942 ² to carry out under great difficulties the demolitions which should have been made in April 1941.

Despite the lessons of the campaign in **France** the Allied commanders had not always allowed for the 'surprising ability of armoured fighting vehicles to pass over difficult ground.' ³ The Royal Air Force had certainly been outnumbered by the *Luftwaffe* but its difficulties had been accentuated by the inability of the Greeks to provide more airfields. Limited in number, they had been so vulnerable that losses on the ground had been serious. Wireless communications had been another problem: staffs had not always been thoroughly

trained; the wireless silence before operations had prevented the checking of faults; and the great mountain ranges had interfered with reception.

The actual fighting had, however, brought out much that was satisfactory, Wilson reporting that the battle discipline of 'the New Zealand Division was particularly high' and one German account stating that the British troops 'fought an outstanding defensive battle in the craggy wooded country in which they had to fight.'⁴ The morale of the Division had certainly been high. The troops had genuinely regretted the successive withdrawals and the failure to fight a 'real battle'. They had been subjected to incessant air attacks interrupted only by bad weather, yet by strict discipline, careful concealment and determined road movement they had successfully completed the withdrawals to the beaches.

The Germans did suggest that their own policy of counter-attacks, if applied by the British, would have seriously disorganised the long strung-out panzer divisions. But the withdrawal, which was based upon an intricate timetable, did not allow for such variations

¹ See pp. 202– 3.

² See M. B. McGlynn, *Special Service in Greece* (Episodes and Studies series), War History Branch, 1954.

³ Wilson, 'Report on Operations in Greece, March–April 1941'.

⁴ 'Notes on English Methods of Fighting', by *2 Panzer Division*.

in plan. The first object had always to be the punctual arrival of units at the embarkation beaches, and the fact that so many men were evacuated suggests that the policy adopted was the wisest one under the

circumstances.

The division of the Force into brigade groups and their evacuation from widely separated beaches has been criticised. Some would have preferred the creation of a defensive screen behind which the embarkation could, possibly, have been better controlled and more complete. By such methods the evacuation from Gallipoli had been a brilliant success, but because the troops in that peninsula were already concentrated and could move on foot straight from their trenches to the ships, the comparison ¹ may not mean a great deal.

So far as W Force was concerned, it is doubtful if the basic evacuation plan drawn up by the Navy, Army and Air Force authorities could have been greatly improved. The front was changing rapidly and the military situation was frequently obscure; at Headquarters, British Troops in Greece, in Athens it was 'impossible to arrive at any reliable figures or to predict the sequence of events.' The plan had therefore been 'a rough approximation', ² easily adjustable according to changing circumstances.

Lack of air cover was another reason for the choice of several evacuation points. To avoid the concentrated efforts of the Luftwaffe the Navy insisted that the Germans must not know 'the exact beaches in use', ³ that outgoing ships must have time to clear the coast 'without being spotted'. ⁴

The other problem of the evacuation was the bottleneck likely to arise from a shortage of small craft for ferrying men from the beaches to the ships. Caiques, motor-boats and local craft were used, but the last named could not be relied upon unless commanded by British officers, and they were not always available. The situation was saved by the presence of the 'Glen' ships with their special landing craft, without which it would have been impossible, in the time available, to evacuate so large a force.

The really serious weakness in the overall plan was the early closing

of **Anzac Corps Headquarters**. On 23 April, after the destruction of the **Royal Air Force Hurricanes** at **Argos**, **Wilson** and **Baillie-Grohman** decided that there must be more embarkation from the **Peloponnese**, especially from **Monemvasia** and **Kalamata**. The commanders and staffs of **Anzac Corps** and of the Australian

¹ One feature is common to both evacuations: the pessimistic statements by the senior officers. **Wilson** expected 30 per cent of **W Force** to leave **Greece**; **Hamilton** had forecast that only 50 per cent of his men would be evacuated from **Gallipoli**.

² **Admiral Cunningham's Despatch, *Transportation of the Army to Greece and Evacuation of the Army from Greece, 1941.*** (Supplement to *The London Gazette*, 18 May 1948.)

³ See pp. 404– 5.

⁴ See p. 430.

and New Zealand divisions would make an early departure, leaving **Wilson's headquarters** to make any further adjustments to the plan. 'Rowell protested that, in view of this changed situation, **Anzac Corps headquarters** should remain, but **Blamey** replied that he had been ordered to go.' ¹ **Anzac Corps Headquarters** had, therefore, closed at midnight on 23–24 April and next day **Mackay** and **Freyberg** were told that their staffs would embark that night. The Australians obeyed these instructions but **Freyberg**, whose 6 Brigade was in action at **Thermopylae**, disregarded the order. It was fortunate that he did so, otherwise **Wilson's staff** would have been left to direct the Australian and New Zealand divisions, 1 Armoured Brigade, base troops, labour battalions and Yugoslavs. As it was, **Freyberg** was left in command after the departure of **Wilson** on 26 April, when there were still many thousands to be evacuated. Information was very limited—he did not, for example, know about the embarkation from **Kalamata**—and the troops

were widely dispersed; the movements of the enemy were but vaguely known; and the signals system was incomplete. The one saving feature was the presence at **Monemvasia** of Admiral Baillie-Grohman with a small staff and a wireless set, by which communications were established with 4 Brigade at **Porto Rafti** and the naval authorities in **Crete**. The final embarkations were then possible, but **Freyberg** had to face alone, with inadequate resources, the problems which arose from the decision to use several embarkation beaches, from the late decision to embark from **Monemvasia** and **Kalamata** and from the unexpected isolation of 4 Brigade at **Porto Rafti**.

¹ Long, p. 151.

The Attitude of the Commonwealth

The despatch of the expedition to **Greece** was of considerable importance in the constitutional history of the Commonwealth. Great risks have sometimes to be taken for good causes, but neither **Australia** nor New Zealand wanted to see divisions which could have been used in the **Pacific** being thrown away in the **Balkans**. In August 1940 the **New Zealand Government** had hesitated for some time before arranging for the defence of **Fiji** and the despatch of the **Third Echelon** to the **Middle East**.²

In Australia the question of the AIF operating outside the **Pacific** area had sharply divided the political parties. The Opposition members of the Advisory War Council had refused to make any comment about the **Balkan** front; in fact Mr Curtin, the Leader of the Opposition, after pointing out that the Government had made the

² See pp. 46– 8.

decision which sent the troops to **Greece**, reminded the Council that if the Labour Party's policy had been followed there would have been no

Australian force in the Middle East.

In the Middle East itself there were command problems which had arisen because no attempt had been made to define a policy for the control and integration of Commonwealth forces during a major war. The Middle East Command did not appear to appreciate the fact that Generals Blamey and Freyberg were commanding the national armies of self-governing Dominions. As the former afterwards explained to the Australian Advisory War Council, the British commanders still ‘had difficulty in recognising the independent status of the Dominions and their responsibility for the control of their own forces.’¹ With his experience of the problems of the AIF in 1914–18, he had insisted that his corps should remain intact. General Freyberg, because of his efforts to co-operate with the Middle East Command, which was drastically short of specialist troops, had for a time been left with a depleted force and, on one occasion, had been faced with a proposal to distribute his units about the Middle East Command.²

The two generals were in a difficult position. In one sense they were subordinate commanders who were not expected to air their opinions about the major strategy of the war, but they were also independent commanders responsible to governments which were quite determined to make their own decisions. So far as Greece was concerned, both generals seem to have been soldiers first and politicians second.

General Freyberg, when told on 17 February that his division was going to Greece, did not advise the New Zealand Government of his doubts and apprehensions. As he afterwards explained: ‘We attended and were given instructions to go.’ Nor did he mention that on 5 March, before leaving for Greece, he had told General Wavell that he, Freyberg, had no illusions about the difficulties ahead.

After the campaign Mr Fraser, who was then in Cairo, was amazed to learn from Freyberg ‘... that he never considered the operation a feasible one, though, as I pointed out to him, his telegram earlier conveyed a contrary impression. In this connection he drew attention to the

difficulty of a subordinate commander criticising the plans of superior officers, but I have made it plain to him that in any future case where he doubts the propriety of a proposal he is to give the

¹ Long, p. 553. Had *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, 1914–1919* (ed. Robert Blake), **London**, 1952, then been available, the British commanders might have known that Australians looked upon themselves ‘not as part and parcel of the English Army but as Allies beside us’ (p. 266); that Currie, the Canadian commander, was suffering from a ‘swollen head’ when he wished his divisions to fight as a Canadian Corps (p. 303).

² See p. 52.

War Cabinet in **Wellington** full opportunity of considering the proposal, with his views on it, and that we understood that he would have done so in any case.’ ¹

This was the only occasion in the six years of the war when there was any such misunderstanding between the Government and **General Freyberg**. As an independent commander he thereafter used the powers ² given to him in his charter of authority: ‘To communicate directly either with the **New Zealand Government** or with the Commander-in-Chief under whose command he is serving, in respect of all details leading up to and arising from policy decisions.’ And it is quite certain that the Government never failed to support its commander.

With General Blamey it was much the same. On 18 February, when he received his first warning of the move to **Greece**, he was worried but had not informed the Australian Government, having been told by General Wavell that Mr Menzies had already given his approval of the plan. ³ Shortly afterwards he learnt from Wavell that the proposal had been accepted by a meeting of the War Cabinet in **London** at which Mr Menzies was present. He was still the subordinate commander when he wrote to Mr Menzies on 5 March saying: ‘I am not criticising the higher policy that has required it, but regret that it must take this dangerous

form.’ It was the interview with Generals Dill and Wavell the following day that brought matters to a head. ‘Although both on this and on the previous visits my views were not asked for and I felt I was receiving instructions, I made inquiries as to what other formation would be available and when.’ The answers so disturbed him that he ‘ventured to remark’ that the operation was ‘most hazardous’ and then cabled to **Australia** for permission to submit his views. When the discussion ⁴ which they aroused had died down he, too, was told what his policy should have been. Mr Menzies declared that as he had been given his powers as GOC of the AIF he ‘should not have hesitated to offer his views.’

There was also the constitutional side to the problem. On 11 March Mr Fadden, acting Prime Minister in **Canberra**, when keeping Mr Fraser informed of **Australia's** protests to the British Government, ended his cable with this note: ‘Finally we protest against the actions of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs entering into an agreement affecting Dominion troops without prior consultation. While appreciating difficult circumstances in which he was placed we feel nevertheless repetition of such an action might

¹ Fraser to acting Prime Minister, **Wellington**, 7 Jun 1941.

² See pp. 19– 20.

³ See p. 99.

⁴ See pp. 108, 114, 115– 16.

well have far reaching and unfortunate Imperial repercussions.’ ¹ The New Zealand Government, though very worried about the safety and intelligent use of its expeditionary force was, for the time being, less concerned about this constitutional problem. Its immediate desire was that New Zealand's advice and opinion be asked for in good time by

those responsible for the major decisions of the war effort.

Nevertheless, the campaign had made it clear to the Dominions that the problems of Commonwealth relations were not always understood by the British Government or by the Higher Command in the [Middle East](#). When the campaigns in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) were over Mr Fraser addressed a formidable list of questions ² to the British Government. Complete answers were not made, but the result satisfied Mr Fraser. Thereafter the two commanders, as well as their respective Governments, insisted ³ that they had rights and were prepared to assert them.

There is, however, another aspect of the problem which must be recognised. In war unity of command is essential and Dominion commanders with special powers could possibly be as selfish and unimaginative as the Dutch deputies who almost wrecked the plans of [Marlborough](#). As [General Freyberg](#) has since stated, the system was ‘productive of great friction, and could have been anticipated and avoided if the problem of the integration of Dominion contingents had been thoroughly examined at the staff colleges between the wars In any future war at least one third of the British forces will be from Commonwealth countries overseas. These forces must be used in the best way possible.’ ⁴

¹ **Fadden to PM NZ, 11 Mar 1941.**

² **As the questions, and the answers to them, are of some constitutional importance, they are reproduced as [Appendix III](#) to this volume.**

³ **[Freyberg](#) to Fraser, 14 Oct 1942: ‘It takes a new Commander-in-Chief some time to understand the relationship of a Dominion force to its own Government. They are prone to look upon us as just another British division. They are inclined to tell us what we may send in the way of information. If I were to agree to the last proposal it would have had the effect of muzzling me completely. I meet him [[Montgomery](#)] tomorrow morning and shall tell him**

that I am in duty bound to send you a full and frank opinion of any operation contemplated where the Division is to be employed, that I have done so in the past, and that the **New Zealand Government** expect it of me in the future.’—
Documents, Vol. II, p. 127.

⁴ **Lord Freyberg** in the House of Lords debate on ‘The Statement of Defences’, 17 Mar 1954.

The Importance of the Campaign

The decision to send the Imperial force to **Greece** has already been the subject of much discussion. Some have argued that the original promise to support **Greece** was given when **France** was still a power in the Eastern Mediterranean. After her defeat no aid could be expected from her and the obvious course was to continue the thrust across the **Western Desert**. General Wavell has said, however, that his forces could not have ‘cleared up the North African coast for good and all.’¹ The state of his armoured units and mechanised transport did not permit an advance of 500 miles to **Tripoli**; the **Royal Air Force** was still outnumbered; and the **Navy**, already unable to use **Benghazi**² because of the lack of anti-aircraft guns, could not have maintained an army and air force in **Tripoli**.

On the other hand, it is difficult to accept his statement that the service chiefs recognised the dangers of the Greek expedition but thought that there was a reasonable chance of defending **Greece** and of controlling the northern shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. The strength of the German Army, the lack of air support, the indefinite attitude of **Yugoslavia**, the decision of **Turkey** to remain neutral, and the problems of supply and reinforcement from Egypt to **Macedonia**: all suggest that from the strictly military point of view the wise decision would have been to stop the expedition, even though troops were already embarking and any changes would have caused considerable confusion. In fact, Wavell afterwards admitted that ‘the whole expedition was

something in the nature of a gamble' ³ with the dice loaded against it from the start.

Some authorities have been more downright. Papagos believed that 'For Greece to be crushed without a single British officer striking a blow in her defence would have meant a flagrant breach of the promises so repeatedly given. Such a defection might well have provoked an outcry against the British Government on the part of the British people and Press. Also it would certainly have had an unfortunate effect on American public opinion ...' But he still thought that the movement of **W Force** from North Africa to 'certain failure' in the **Balkans** was 'a strategic error in contradiction with the principles of a sound conduct of the war.' ⁴ One military historian has even said that 'The affair appears to have been handled with political and strategic frivolity, and the British Government did not deserve to get off as lightly as it did'. ⁵ Others have stressed the political side of the question. Blamey thought that military considerations had been outweighed; that the force had been despatched for political reasons. ⁶ The General Staff in the United Kingdom, according to General Martel, had never been confident. 'The whole matter was, of course, inevitably bound up with political considerations that may have outweighed the purely military aspect.

¹ 'The British Expedition to **Greece**, 1941', *Army Quarterly*, January 1950.

² Cunningham, pp. 310–11.

³ Despatch covering period 7 February to 15 July 1941.

⁴ General Alexandros Papagos, *The Battle of Greece, 1940–41*, **Athens**, J. M. Scazakis 'Alpha' edition, 1949, p. 316.

⁵ Cyril Falls, *The Second World War*, p. 91.

As we had taken no clear line, we eventually drifted into a position where we were bound to come to their help, and at that stage the C.I.G.S. (General Dill) agreed with the decision to do so.’¹ In one sense this is misleading; the records show that Dill definitely helped to make the decision, even though he could,² with a clear conscience, have decided against the venture. Nevertheless, he admitted that risks were being taken, for on 17 March when in **Cyrenaica** he remarked to General Neame: ‘You are going to get a bloody nose here, Philip, and it is not the only place where we shall get bloody noses.’³ Lord Alanbrooke, who succeeded General Dill as CIGS, has since stated that intervention in **Greece** was a strategic blunder, that he ‘doubted Dill’s advice and judgment.’ But, unlike most critics, Lord Alanbrooke has been careful to admit that he, Alanbrooke, was hardly ‘in a position to form any definite opinion’ as he was ‘not familiar with all the facts.’⁴

To Mr Churchill the less tactful, more outspoken experts were ‘officers occupying subordinate positions’ and not possessing ‘the knowledge to consider sufficiently what ... the opposite policy’⁵ would have conceded to **Hitler**—an open road to **Palestine**, **Egypt**, **Iraq** and **Persia**, a division of the spoils with **Russia** or an earlier and more powerful offensive against her. This may be only a list of possibilities, but the same title could be given to the advantages which might or might not have been gained from an advance beyond **Benghazi**. General O’Connor thought that with full naval and air support he could have occupied **Tripoli**, but from the comments of Admiral Cunningham it seems very doubtful⁶ whether the Army could have been supplied by sea through **Benghazi**.

Criticism has also been made of naval policy at this critical period. On 21 April, just before the evacuation of **W Force** from **Greece**, there had been that hazardous bombardment of **Tripoli** which Admiral Cunningham thought quite unjustifiable. No losses were suffered but

Churchill now admits that the Admiralty, with his full agreement, forced Cunningham to run undue risks. But here, as with the Greek campaign, he emphasises the overall situation: 'we at home alone could measure the proportion of world events, and final responsibility lay with us.' ⁷

¹ Lt-Gen Sir Giffard Martel, *Our Armoured Forces*, p. 93.

² See Churchill's cable, p. 99.

³ Lt-Gen Sir P. Neame, *Playing with Strife*, p. 268.

⁴ Sir Arthur Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 248.

⁵ Churchill, Vol III, pp. 26–7. The opinion of certain officers is given in B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*.

⁶ The extra 200 miles from **Alexandria**, the widely breached breakwater, the partially blocked entrance, the closer proximity to enemy air bases in **Tripoli** and **Sicily**: all these factors forced Cunningham on 22 February to tell the Army that if **Benghazi** port could not be effectively defended the **Navy** could not use it. —Cunningham, p. 310. See also Wavell's statement, p. 478.

⁷ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 215.

This being the case, it is easy to understand why Wavell thought that the final reasons for the Greek campaign were political and psychological. It also explains the advice given by Dill to General Auchinleck on 26 June 1941. After discussing the different factors which had influenced Wavell in the preceding months, Dill said: 'The fact is that the Commander in the field will always be subject to great and often undue pressure from his Government. **Wellington** suffered from it: Haig suffered from it: Wavell suffered from it. Nothing will stop it. In fact, pressure from those who alone see the picture as a whole and

carry the main responsibility may be necessary ... the pressure often comes from very broad political considerations; these are sometimes so powerful as to make it necessary to take risks which from the purely military point of view, may seem inadvisable.' ¹

If studied from this angle the expedition to **Greece** may be explained. For the breadth and complexity of modern warfare can create demands which military leaders are not always qualified to assess and coordinate. Men, resources and national morale—all controlled by politicians—are more important than ever before. Consequently it cannot be expected that the politicians should fall silent once mobilisation begins and remain silent until the commanders have completed their tasks. Military and political action must go hand in hand.

In any case, democracies do not always act on purely military considerations, otherwise they would not be democracies. Hence the statement by Admiral Cunningham: 'we had encouraged the Greeks in their resistance to the Italians, and it seemed all wrong to desert them now.' ²

Another factor of political importance was the strategic situation in the spring of 1941. The fighting spirit of **Britain** was then magnificent but Mr Churchill—and many cold-blooded unromantic observers—knew that she had no chance whatsoever of winning the war by her own unaided efforts. Allies had to be found and it was no use stalling for time, for opportunity seldom knocks at the door; statesmen, like other mortals, have to knock at its door. Mr Churchill had, therefore, been cultivating the friendship of the **United States**. In May 1940 he had begun his confidential correspondence with Mr Roosevelt and accepted the loan of fifty destroyers. In February–March 1941, when the conferences were taking place in **Athens**, the Lend-Lease Bill had been before Congress. So much depended upon it that on 28 February he cabled to Mr Hopkins: 'Let me know when the Bill will be through.

¹ J. R. M. Butler, *Grand Strategy*, Vol. II (September 1939–

² Cunningham, p. 320.

The strain is growing here.' On 7 March, when **Britain** finally decided to support **Greece**, the bill was still before Congress, but it was passed two days later and Churchill could cable: 'Thank God for your news.' ¹

But this was not sufficient, for the great majority of the American people, though sympathetic towards **Britain**, were still anxious to keep out of the war. This explains why Mr Churchill had thought of American opinion before supporting **Greece** and why he was hopeful, after the evacuation, that the risks taken to support an ally had appealed to the Americans. Mr Roosevelt certainly described it as 'a wholly justified action', but the next step in the 'wooing', ² the signing of the Atlantic Charter, did not take place until August 1941. And it was not until 7 December that the Japanese, by bombing **Pearl Harbour**, ensured the entry of the **United States** into the war. **America's** policy of isolation and the overall situation in 1941 are therefore some justification for Churchill's determined efforts to win the respect and sympathy of the **United States**. ³

The desperate isolation of **Britain** will also explain Churchill's desire to create a **Balkan** front 'with effects upon **Russia** which could not be measured by us.' **Greece** and **Turkey** were openly friendly. **Rumania** had lined up with **Germany** but the other states were hesitant, as was obvious from the moves and counter-moves in the months immediately before the despatch of the expedition. **Bulgaria** had signed a treaty of friendship and non-aggression with **Turkey** on 17 February and did not adhere to the Tripartite Pact until 1 March. **Hungary** had been an adherent in November 1940 but she had also, the following month, signed a pact of friendship with **Yugoslavia**. That country, bereft of her alliance with **France** and suspicious of Italian designs, had, on 25 June, re-established diplomatic relations with **Russia**, the ancient guarantor of **Serbia**. In other ways, however, **Russia** had remained the incalculable

factor. Apparently indifferent to the fate of the western powers, she had permitted **Hitler** to dominate **Rumania** and **Bulgaria**; instead of declaring war upon **Germany**, it seemed more likely that she would attempt to grab her share of the British Empire. Yet there were many who simply could not believe that she had so easily forgotten her pan-Slav sympathies and her age-old ambitions in south-east **Europe**.

All the same, it was a distinctly intricate mosaic and the chances of its arrangement according to the British pattern were not very great. The best that could be done was to prevent **Hitler** creating

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 111.

² Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 282. On 8 December, the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbour, Churchill was no longer cautious. 'Oh, that is the way we talked to her while we were wooing her; now that she is in the harem, we talk to her quite differently.'

³ See p. 112 for references to **Hitler** and the **United States**.

a group of **Balkan** states subservient to the Axis. Consequently, when **Yugoslavia** staged her *coup d'état* and refused to become a German satellite, **Britain** increased her efforts to assist her. No support came from **Hungary**, in fact the pro-German element arranged for the movement of German troops towards **Yugoslavia**, but the suicide of the Hungarian premier on 2 April was 'a sacrifice to absolve himself and his people from guilt in the German attack upon **Yugoslavia**.' ¹

The reaction of **Russia** was not immediate but it did show that she was still interested in the **Balkans**. On the night of 5–6 April, only a few hours before **Yugoslavia** was invaded, Stalin had signed a non-aggression pact with **Yugoslavia** and, to the annoyance of **Hitler**, it contained a clause for friendly relations in the event of war. Actually it was little more than a gesture; **Russia** or, more particularly, Stalin, preferred a

policy of appeasement.

In any case, it was not what Stalin thought of **Germany** but what **Hitler** thought of **Russia** that mattered, and on this subject British opinion was undecided but always hopeful. **Sir Stafford Cripps** ² had for months predicted that **Hitler** would attack **Russia** in the spring of 1941. The Joint Intelligence Committee, ³ on the other hand, were inclined to think that his main task for 1941 would be the invasion of **Britain**. ⁴ As for Mr Churchill, he waited hopefully until the end of March when the reported movements of panzer divisions, before and after the *coup d'état* in **Yugoslavia**, convinced him that **Russia** would eventually be invaded. In a note to Mr Eden, who was still in **Athens**, on 30 March he suggested that **Yugoslavia** or **Turkey** was about to be invaded and then added this deduction: 'Bear will be kept waiting a bit. Furthermore, these orders and counter-orders in their relation to the Belgrade *coup* seem to reveal magnitude of design both towards south-east and east. This is the clearest indication we have had so far. Let me know in guarded terms whether you and Dill agree with my impressions.' ⁵

The wording of this message suggests that Russo-German enmity was definitely one of the 'broad political considerations' for which risks had to be taken.

This must not be forgotten, for the expedition, quite apart from the battle casualties, was most costly. After making every effort to build up supply bases for a long campaign the British brought

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 148. Restricted independence was maintained until the German occupation in March 1944.

² Barbarossa; the origins and development of **Hitler's** plan to attack **Russia**'; unpublished monograph by E. M. Robertson, Enemy Documents Section, Cabinet Office, **London**.

³ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 318.

⁴ In April 1941, when Churchill proposed to increase the number of tanks he was about to send through the **Mediterranean** to the **Middle East**, Dill disagreed 'in view of the shortage for Home Defence.'—*Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁵ Churchill, Vol. III, pp. 319–20.

away no artillery, no heavy equipment and none of the 8000 vehicles which would have been so useful in the **Western Desert**. The **Navy** had lost the destroyers *Diamond* and *Wryneck*; the transports *Ulster Prince*, *Pennland*, *Slamat* and *Costa Rica* had been sunk; and the landing ship *Glenearn* had been damaged. In addition the Air Force had lost 209 aircraft. More important still, the movement of men and equipment to **Greece** had made possible the rapid advance of the Axis forces in **Cyrenaica**.

The evacuation of the Force from **Greece** and this unexpected threat in the **Western Desert** so disturbed the country that the British Government decided to ask for a vote of confidence. In the debate on 6 and 7 May its overall conduct of the war was criticised from many angles, but the actual decision to send the expedition to **Greece** was accepted as natural and honourable, so much so that the House divided 447 for and only 3 against. Once again political rather than military factors had decided the issue. For Mr Churchill in his defence said: 'Looking back on the sad course of events, I can only feel, as the Prime Minister of New Zealand has so nobly declared, that if we had again to tread the stony path, even with the knowledge we possess today, I for one would do the same thing again, and this is the view of all my colleagues in the War Cabinet and on the Defence Committee.' ¹

His reward came long afterwards when it was learnt that the aggressive policy of the Government had made it impossible for **Hitler** to enjoy all the advantages of his dominant position in **Europe**. On the principle that it was better to do something rather than do nothing, they had harassed the Germans wherever possible. And as a result, 'striking

powers for Barbarossa' ² had been sacrificed because the Germans feared British diversions on the French coast and in **Norway** and were forced to support the Italians in North **Africa**.

Their refusal to permit the peaceful occupation of the **Balkans** had similar results. On 17 March **Hitler**, as a result of the movement of **W Force to Greece**, decided that **MARITA** (the Greek campaign) must give him air supremacy over the Eastern Mediterranean. This meant the occupation not only of northern **Greece** but also of **Attica** and probably the entire **Peloponnese**. Larger forces had therefore to be employed and that, in turn, had meant the employment ³ of forces previously allocated to **BARBAROSSA** (the Russian campaign).

The resistance of **Yugoslavia** had a still greater influence on German war policy. **Hitler** had always known that he would even-

¹ House of Commons Debates, 6 and 7 May 1941.

² Halder's Diary.

³ Ibid.

tually need the Yugoslav transport system if he was to transfer his divisions from **Greece** to the Russian front, but he had expected to be given the use of it through the adherence of **Yugoslavia** to the Tripartite Pact. After the *coup d'état*—for which British diplomacy and the expedition to **Greece** may have been partly responsible ¹—this could no longer be expected and, furthermore, there was always the danger of a hostile and pro-Russian **Yugoslavia** to the rear of his armies on the Russian front. Faced with this threat, **Hitler** could not avoid a campaign in **Yugoslavia**. As he explained to Mussolini on 27 March, the position was not catastrophic but it was a difficult one and they had to avoid any mistake, otherwise, in the end, their whole position would be endangered. Plans were drawn up that night for Operation 25 (the

Yugoslav campaign);

MARITA

was revised; and

BARBAROSSA

was postponed for four weeks.² On 7 April, when the plans for the changeover from Operation 25 to

BARBAROSSA

were complete, the date was altered to 'about 22 June', a postponement of over five weeks.

It has been suggested that **Hitler** might have attacked before that date had it not been for the unusually heavy rain in May which prevented any armoured offensive until the second week in June. Consequently there is no exact estimate of the time which he lost because of his **Balkan** campaign. The most reliable German authorities thought that 'the friction in the **Balkans** and the exceptional weather in 1941 caused the loss of four precious weeks.'³ In the opinion of Mr Churchill, 'a delay of five weeks was imposed upon the supreme operation as the result of our resistance in the **Balkans**, and especially of the Yugoslav revolution. No one can measure exactly what consequences this had before winter set in upon the fortunes of the German-Russian campaign. It is reasonable to believe that **Moscow** was saved thereby.'⁴

Another result of **Hitler's** enforced intervention in the **Balkans** was the gradual development of strong resistance movements in both **Greece** and **Yugoslavia**. In the latter particularly, the partisans led by Marshal Tito fought a guerrilla war similar to that by which Spanish patriots had crippled Napoleon's army in the Peninsula. It became another running sore, so ugly that by 1945, when **Hitler's** armies were fighting desperately to hold several crumbling fronts, he still had to have a dozen German divisions scattered throughout **Yugoslavia**.

¹ Goering afterwards talked of Russian influence and extensive

financial backing 'on the part of England'. See N.D., Vol. IX, p. 33.

² See p. 158.

³ F. Halder, Chief of the General Staff; G. Blumentritt, Chief of Staff of the *Fourth Army* in **Poland**.

⁴ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 316.

This fact afterwards led General Wilson to point out the similarity of the Corunna campaign of 1808 to the Greek campaign of 1941: 'the effect of the appearance of a small British force on the strategy of a superior force engaged in aggression; the fury of a Dictator, causing him to commit larger forces than the situation demanded; the British retreat over similar terrain and covering the same distance; in both cases the miscalculation by H.M. Government as to the degree of resistance to be expected from the Allies which the expedition was intended to assist; finally its far-reaching after effects on the war in **Europe**.' ¹ To complete the comparison he could have pointed out that sea power had made possible the successful evacuation of each expeditionary force.

It could be argued that these results were unpredictable; that those who use them to justify the expedition are simply being wise after the event. But it would be unjust to Churchill, Eden, Smuts and the senior commanders in the **Middle East** to make such statements without studying the situation as it was early in 1941. Because the friendship of possible allies had to be cultivated, decisions were made for ethical and political as well as for military reasons. **Britain** could not stand aside and permit **Germany** to overrun the **Balkans** and to threaten the future of **Turkey** and the **Middle East**. Nor could she assume that there was no chance of a **Balkan** front and no fundamental antagonism between Nazi Germany and Soviet **Russia**. Risks had to be taken to get possible results in the future. The costly evacuation and the failure of the **Balkan** powers

to take 'simultaneous action' were certainly disappointing. But the expedition does seem to have impressed Mr Roosevelt; it helped to create that unstable **Balkan** front to which **Hitler** was forever sending men and equipment; it was a threat to German security at a most awkward time and place; and it had considerable influence upon the course of the war in **Russia**. As a long-term investment it was therefore well worth the risks which had been taken.

¹ Wilson, *Eight Years Overseas*, p. 102.

TO GREECE

THE PROBLEMS OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Problems of the Campaign

THE weakness ¹ of the Greek Army, the small Imperial force available, the inadequate port, road and railway facilities, the difficulties already facing the **Navy** and the Air Force, and the lack of information about Yugoslav plans for mobilisation and deployment had all been known to the service chiefs when they decided to despatch **W Force** to **Greece**. Such risks had to be faced, otherwise **Britain** would not have been able to influence, in any appreciable manner, **Hitler's** movements in south-east **Europe**.

But there were, during the campaign itself, many unexpected problems. The Greeks had been unwilling to have their roads, ports and railway facilities wrecked beyond repair. Of the demolitions effected, those in the **Platamon** tunnel were the most successful because they blocked for some weeks the movement of railway traffic between **Athens** and **Salonika**, but in other areas the demolitions halted the enemy for only short periods. And in the Peloponnese little or no effort was made to isolate the embarkation areas; in fact the *SS 'Adolf Hitler' Division*, when it crossed to Patrai, found the railway system in working order and was able, by assembling two trains, to rush troops south to **Kalamata**. This had actually been unnecessary. The advanced guard of *5 Panzer Division*, using the undamaged highway south of **Corinth**, had already arrived and captured ² the thousands assembled there for embarkation.

Immediately after the campaign the results of this policy were still more evident. In the preparations for the attack upon **Crete** the Germans used the petrol installations at **Piræus**, the docking facilities at all ports, Radio Station **Athens**—the only **Balkan** station which could be used as a beacon for aircraft operations over **Crete**—long stretches of the railway system, all the airfields and, most important of all, the **Corinth Canal**. The wreckage from the bridge had certainly delayed the

movement from the Adriatic of the vessels carrying petrol for the *Luftwaffe*, but divers with special equipment

¹ On 7 February 1941 No. 27 Military Mission reported that as **Yugoslavia** and **Turkey** did not appear willing to resist, and as Great Britain had not the necessary resources, any Greek aggression would be more like a political gesture than a military operation. See pp. 151– 2 for conditions in **Greece**.

² See p. 453.

had been flown down from **Kiel** and the canal had been successfully cleared. All the same, had the delay lasted any longer the attack upon **Crete** would have been postponed. Consequently it is to be regretted that the British, with their respect for the wishes of the Greeks, did not block the canal as thoroughly as did the Germans later when they, in their turn, were forced to withdraw.

Just as important was the failure to demolish ¹ some of the great bridges to the north, more particularly the one in the Asopos Gorge. Once the minor bridges were replaced and the **Platamon** tunnel was cleared, troops and supplies came south by rail to **Piráus** and from there were shipped to North Africa. Specially selected and carefully trained units had therefore to be sent over to **Greece** in 1942 ² to carry out under great difficulties the demolitions which should have been made in April 1941.

Despite the lessons of the campaign in **France** the Allied commanders had not always allowed for the 'surprising ability of armoured fighting vehicles to pass over difficult ground.' ³ The Royal Air Force had certainly been outnumbered by the *Luftwaffe* but its difficulties had been accentuated by the inability of the Greeks to provide more airfields. Limited in number, they had been so vulnerable that losses on the ground had been serious. Wireless communications had been another problem: staffs had not always been thoroughly

trained; the wireless silence before operations had prevented the checking of faults; and the great mountain ranges had interfered with reception.

The actual fighting had, however, brought out much that was satisfactory, Wilson reporting that the battle discipline of 'the New Zealand Division was particularly high' and one German account stating that the British troops 'fought an outstanding defensive battle in the craggy wooded country in which they had to fight.'⁴ The morale of the Division had certainly been high. The troops had genuinely regretted the successive withdrawals and the failure to fight a 'real battle'. They had been subjected to incessant air attacks interrupted only by bad weather, yet by strict discipline, careful concealment and determined road movement they had successfully completed the withdrawals to the beaches.

The Germans did suggest that their own policy of counter-attacks, if applied by the British, would have seriously disorganised the long strung-out panzer divisions. But the withdrawal, which was based upon an intricate timetable, did not allow for such variations

¹ See pp. 202– 3.

² See M. B. McGlynn, *Special Service in Greece* (Episodes and Studies series), War History Branch, 1954.

³ Wilson, 'Report on Operations in Greece, March–April 1941'.

⁴ 'Notes on English Methods of Fighting', by *2 Panzer Division*.

in plan. The first object had always to be the punctual arrival of units at the embarkation beaches, and the fact that so many men were evacuated suggests that the policy adopted was the wisest one under the

circumstances.

The division of the Force into brigade groups and their evacuation from widely separated beaches has been criticised. Some would have preferred the creation of a defensive screen behind which the embarkation could, possibly, have been better controlled and more complete. By such methods the evacuation from Gallipoli had been a brilliant success, but because the troops in that peninsula were already concentrated and could move on foot straight from their trenches to the ships, the comparison ¹ may not mean a great deal.

So far as W Force was concerned, it is doubtful if the basic evacuation plan drawn up by the Navy, Army and Air Force authorities could have been greatly improved. The front was changing rapidly and the military situation was frequently obscure; at Headquarters, British Troops in Greece, in Athens it was 'impossible to arrive at any reliable figures or to predict the sequence of events.' The plan had therefore been 'a rough approximation', ² easily adjustable according to changing circumstances.

Lack of air cover was another reason for the choice of several evacuation points. To avoid the concentrated efforts of the Luftwaffe the Navy insisted that the Germans must not know 'the exact beaches in use', ³ that outgoing ships must have time to clear the coast 'without being spotted'. ⁴

The other problem of the evacuation was the bottleneck likely to arise from a shortage of small craft for ferrying men from the beaches to the ships. Caiques, motor-boats and local craft were used, but the last named could not be relied upon unless commanded by British officers, and they were not always available. The situation was saved by the presence of the 'Glen' ships with their special landing craft, without which it would have been impossible, in the time available, to evacuate so large a force.

The really serious weakness in the overall plan was the early closing

of **Anzac Corps** Headquarters. On 23 April, after the destruction of the **Royal Air Force** Hurricanes at **Argos**, Wilson and Baillie-Grohman decided that there must be more embarkation from the **Peloponnese**, especially from **Monemvasia** and **Kalamata**. The commanders and staffs of **Anzac Corps** and of the Australian

¹ One feature is common to both evacuations: the pessimistic statements by the senior officers. Wilson expected 30 per cent of **W Force** to leave **Greece**; Hamilton had forecast that only 50 per cent of his men would be evacuated from **Gallipoli**.

² Admiral Cunningham's Despatch, *Transportation of the Army to Greece and Evacuation of the Army from Greece, 1941*. (Supplement to *The London Gazette*, 18 May 1948.)

³ See pp. 404–5.

⁴ See p. 430.

and New Zealand divisions would make an early departure, leaving Wilson's headquarters to make any further adjustments to the plan. 'Rowell protested that, in view of this changed situation, Anzac Corps headquarters should remain, but Blamey replied that he had been ordered to go.' ¹ **Anzac Corps** Headquarters had, therefore, closed at midnight on 23–24 April and next day Mackay and **Freyberg** were told that their staffs would embark that night. The Australians obeyed these instructions but **Freyberg**, whose 6 Brigade was in action at **Thermopylae**, disregarded the order. It was fortunate that he did so, otherwise Wilson's staff would have been left to direct the Australian and New Zealand divisions, 1 Armoured Brigade, base troops, labour battalions and Yugoslavs. As it was, **Freyberg** was left in command after the departure of Wilson on 26 April, when there were still many thousands to be evacuated. Information was very limited—he did not, for example, know about the embarkation from **Kalamata**—and the troops

were widely dispersed; the movements of the enemy were but vaguely known; and the signals system was incomplete. The one saving feature was the presence at **Monemvasia** of Admiral Baillie-Grohman with a small staff and a wireless set, by which communications were established with 4 Brigade at **Porto Rafti** and the naval authorities in **Crete**. The final embarkations were then possible, but **Freyberg** had to face alone, with inadequate resources, the problems which arose from the decision to use several embarkation beaches, from the late decision to embark from **Monemvasia** and **Kalamata** and from the unexpected isolation of 4 Brigade at **Porto Rafti**.

¹ Long, p. 151.

TO GREECE

THE ATTITUDE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

The Attitude of the Commonwealth

The despatch of the expedition to **Greece** was of considerable importance in the constitutional history of the Commonwealth. Great risks have sometimes to be taken for good causes, but neither **Australia** nor New Zealand wanted to see divisions which could have been used in the **Pacific** being thrown away in the **Balkans**. In August 1940 the **New Zealand Government** had hesitated for some time before arranging for the defence of **Fiji** and the despatch of the **Third Echelon** to the **Middle East**.²

In Australia the question of the AIF operating outside the **Pacific** area had sharply divided the political parties. The Opposition members of the Advisory War Council had refused to make any comment about the **Balkan** front; in fact Mr Curtin, the Leader of the Opposition, after pointing out that the Government had made the

² See pp. 46– 8.

decision which sent the troops to **Greece**, reminded the Council that if the Labour Party's policy had been followed there would have been no Australian force in the **Middle East**.

In the **Middle East** itself there were command problems which had arisen because no attempt had been made to define a policy for the control and integration of Commonwealth forces during a major war. The Middle East Command did not appear to appreciate the fact that Generals Blamey and **Freyberg** were commanding the national armies of self-governing Dominions. As the former afterwards explained to the Australian Advisory War Council, the British commanders still 'had difficulty in recognising the independent status of the Dominions and

their responsibility for the control of their own forces.’¹ With his experience of the problems of the AIF in 1914–18, he had insisted that his corps should remain intact. **General Freyberg**, because of his efforts to co-operate with the **Middle East Command**, which was drastically short of specialist troops, had for a time been left with a depleted force and, on one occasion, had been faced with a proposal to distribute his units about the **Middle East Command**.²

The two generals were in a difficult position. In one sense they were subordinate commanders who were not expected to air their opinions about the major strategy of the war, but they were also independent commanders responsible to governments which were quite determined to make their own decisions. So far as **Greece** was concerned, both generals seem to have been soldiers first and politicians second.

General Freyberg, when told on 17 February that his division was going to **Greece**, did not advise the **New Zealand Government** of his doubts and apprehensions. As he afterwards explained: ‘We attended and were given instructions to go.’ Nor did he mention that on 5 March, before leaving for **Greece**, he had told General Wavell that he, **Freyberg**, had no illusions about the difficulties ahead.

After the campaign Mr Fraser, who was then in **Cairo**, was amazed to learn from **Freyberg** ‘... that he never considered the operation a feasible one, though, as I pointed out to him, his telegram earlier conveyed a contrary impression. In this connection he drew attention to the difficulty of a subordinate commander criticising the plans of superior officers, but I have made it plain to him that in any future case where he doubts the propriety of a proposal he is to give the

¹ Long, p. 553. Had *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, 1914–1919* (ed. Robert Blake), **London**, 1952, then been available, the British commanders might have known that Australians looked upon themselves ‘not as part and parcel of the English Army but as Allies beside us’ (p. 266); that Currie, the Canadian commander, was suffering from a ‘swollen head’ when

he wished his divisions to fight as a Canadian Corps (p. 303).

² See p. 52.

War Cabinet in **Wellington** full opportunity of considering the proposal, with his views on it, and that we understood that he would have done so in any case.’¹

This was the only occasion in the six years of the war when there was any such misunderstanding between the Government and **General Freyberg**. As an independent commander he thereafter used the powers² given to him in his charter of authority: ‘To communicate directly either with the **New Zealand Government** or with the Commander-in-Chief under whose command he is serving, in respect of all details leading up to and arising from policy decisions.’ And it is quite certain that the Government never failed to support its commander.

With General Blamey it was much the same. On 18 February, when he received his first warning of the move to **Greece**, he was worried but had not informed the Australian Government, having been told by General Wavell that Mr Menzies had already given his approval of the plan.³ Shortly afterwards he learnt from Wavell that the proposal had been accepted by a meeting of the War Cabinet in **London** at which Mr Menzies was present. He was still the subordinate commander when he wrote to Mr Menzies on 5 March saying: ‘I am not criticising the higher policy that has required it, but regret that it must take this dangerous form.’ It was the interview with Generals Dill and Wavell the following day that brought matters to a head. ‘Although both on this and on the previous visits my views were not asked for and I felt I was receiving instructions, I made inquiries as to what other formation would be available and when.’ The answers so disturbed him that he ‘ventured to remark’ that the operation was ‘most hazardous’ and then cabled to **Australia** for permission to submit his views. When the discussion⁴ which they aroused had died down he, too, was told what his policy should have been. Mr Menzies declared that as he had been given his

powers as GOC of the AIF he 'should not have hesitated to offer his views.'

There was also the constitutional side to the problem. On 11 March Mr Fadden, acting Prime Minister in **Canberra**, when keeping Mr Fraser informed of **Australia's** protests to the British Government, ended his cable with this note: 'Finally we protest against the actions of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs entering into an agreement affecting Dominion troops without prior consultation. While appreciating difficult circumstances in which he was placed we feel nevertheless repetition of such an action might

¹ Fraser to acting Prime Minister, **Wellington**, 7 Jun 1941.

² See pp. 19– 20.

³ See p. 99.

⁴ See pp. 108, 114, 115– 16.

well have far reaching and unfortunate Imperial repercussions.' ¹ The New Zealand Government, though very worried about the safety and intelligent use of its expeditionary force was, for the time being, less concerned about this constitutional problem. Its immediate desire was that New Zealand's advice and opinion be asked for in good time by those responsible for the major decisions of the war effort.

Nevertheless, the campaign had made it clear to the Dominions that the problems of Commonwealth relations were not always understood by the British Government or by the Higher Command in the **Middle East**. When the campaigns in **Greece** and **Crete** were over Mr Fraser addressed a formidable list of questions ² to the British Government. Complete answers were not made, but the result satisfied Mr Fraser. Thereafter the two commanders, as well as their respective Governments, insisted ³

that they had rights and were prepared to assert them.

There is, however, another aspect of the problem which must be recognised. In war unity of command is essential and Dominion commanders with special powers could possibly be as selfish and unimaginative as the Dutch deputies who almost wrecked the plans of **Marlborough**. As **General Freyberg** has since stated, the system was ‘productive of great friction, and could have been anticipated and avoided if the problem of the integration of Dominion contingents had been thoroughly examined at the staff colleges between the wars In any future war at least one third of the British forces will be from Commonwealth countries overseas. These forces must be used in the best way possible.’⁴

¹ Fadden to PM NZ, 11 Mar 1941.

² As the questions, and the answers to them, are of some constitutional importance, they are reproduced as **Appendix III** to this volume.

³ **Freyberg** to Fraser, 14 Oct 1942: ‘It takes a new Commander-in-Chief some time to understand the relationship of a Dominion force to its own Government. They are prone to look upon us as just another British division. They are inclined to tell us what we may send in the way of information. If I were to agree to the last proposal it would have had the effect of muzzling me completely. I meet him [Montgomery] tomorrow morning and shall tell him that I am in duty bound to send you a full and frank opinion of any operation contemplated where the Division is to be employed, that I have done so in the past, and that the **New Zealand Government** expect it of me in the future.’—
Documents, Vol. II, p. 127.

⁴ **Lord Freyberg** in the House of Lords debate on ‘The Statement of Defences’, 17 Mar 1954.

TO GREECE

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Importance of the Campaign

The decision to send the Imperial force to **Greece** has already been the subject of much discussion. Some have argued that the original promise to support **Greece** was given when **France** was still a power in the Eastern Mediterranean. After her defeat no aid could be expected from her and the obvious course was to continue the thrust across the **Western Desert**. General Wavell has said, however, that his forces could not have 'cleared up the North African coast for good and all.'¹ The state of his armoured units and mechanised transport did not permit an advance of 500 miles to **Tripoli**; the **Royal Air Force** was still outnumbered; and the **Navy**, already unable to use **Benghazi**² because of the lack of anti-aircraft guns, could not have maintained an army and air force in **Tripoli**.

On the other hand, it is difficult to accept his statement that the service chiefs recognised the dangers of the Greek expedition but thought that there was a reasonable chance of defending **Greece** and of controlling the northern shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. The strength of the German Army, the lack of air support, the indefinite attitude of **Yugoslavia**, the decision of **Turkey** to remain neutral, and the problems of supply and reinforcement from Egypt to **Macedonia**: all suggest that from the strictly military point of view the wise decision would have been to stop the expedition, even though troops were already embarking and any changes would have caused considerable confusion. In fact, Wavell afterwards admitted that 'the whole expedition was something in the nature of a gamble'³ with the dice loaded against it from the start.

Some authorities have been more downright. Papagos believed that 'For Greece to be crushed without a single British officer striking a blow in her defence would have meant a flagrant breach of the promises so

repeatedly given. Such a defection might well have provoked an outcry against the British Government on the part of the British people and Press. Also it would certainly have had an unfortunate effect on American public opinion' But he still thought that the movement of **W Force** from North Africa to 'certain failure' in the **Balkans** was 'a strategic error in contradiction with the principles of a sound conduct of the war.'⁴ One military historian has even said that 'The affair appears to have been handled with political and strategic frivolity, and the British Government did not deserve to get off as lightly as it did'.⁵ Others have stressed the political side of the question. Blamey thought that military considerations had been outweighed; that the force had been despatched for political reasons.⁶ The General Staff in the United Kingdom, according to General Martel, had never been confident. 'The whole matter was, of course, inevitably bound up with political considerations that may have outweighed the purely military aspect.'

¹ 'The British Expedition to **Greece**, 1941', *Army Quarterly*, January 1950.

² Cunningham, pp. 310–11.

³ Despatch covering period 7 February to 15 July 1941.

⁴ General Alexandros Papagos, *The Battle of **Greece**, 1940–41*, **Athens**, J. M. Scazakis 'Alpha' edition, 1949, p. 316.

⁵ Cyril Falls, *The Second World War*, p. 91.

⁶ Long, p. 193.

As we had taken no clear line, we eventually drifted into a position where we were bound to come to their help, and at that stage the C.I.G.S. (General Dill) agreed with the decision to do so.'¹ In one sense

this is misleading; the records show that Dill definitely helped to make the decision, even though he could, ² with a clear conscience, have decided against the venture. Nevertheless, he admitted that risks were being taken, for on 17 March when in **Cyrenaica** he remarked to General Neame: 'You are going to get a bloody nose here, Philip, and it is not the only place where we shall get bloody noses.' ³ Lord Alanbrooke, who succeeded General Dill as CIGS, has since stated that intervention in **Greece** was a strategic blunder, that he 'doubted Dill's advice and judgment.' But, unlike most critics, Lord Alanbrooke has been careful to admit that he, Alanbrooke, was hardly 'in a position to form any definite opinion' as he was 'not familiar with all the facts.' ⁴

To Mr Churchill the less tactful, more outspoken experts were 'officers occupying subordinate positions' and not possessing 'the knowledge to consider sufficiently what ... the opposite policy' ⁵ would have conceded to **Hitler**—an open road to **Palestine**, **Egypt**, **Iraq** and **Persia**, a division of the spoils with **Russia** or an earlier and more powerful offensive against her. This may be only a list of possibilities, but the same title could be given to the advantages which might or might not have been gained from an advance beyond **Benghazi**. General O'Connor thought that with full naval and air support he could have occupied **Tripoli**, but from the comments of Admiral Cunningham it seems very doubtful ⁶ whether the Army could have been supplied by sea through **Benghazi**.

Criticism has also been made of naval policy at this critical period. On 21 April, just before the evacuation of **W Force** from **Greece**, there had been that hazardous bombardment of **Tripoli** which Admiral Cunningham thought quite unjustifiable. No losses were suffered but Churchill now admits that the Admiralty, with his full agreement, forced Cunningham to run undue risks. But here, as with the Greek campaign, he emphasises the overall situation: 'we at home alone could measure the proportion of world events, and final responsibility lay with us.' ⁷

¹ Lt-Gen Sir Giffard Martel, *Our Armoured Forces*, p. 93.

² See Churchill's cable, p. 99.

³ Lt-Gen Sir P. Neame, *Playing with Strife*, p. 268.

⁴ Sir Arthur Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 248.

⁵ Churchill, Vol III, pp. 26–7. The opinion of certain officers is given in B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*.

⁶ The extra 200 miles from **Alexandria**, the widely breached breakwater, the partially blocked entrance, the closer proximity to enemy air bases in **Tripoli** and **Sicily**: all these factors forced Cunningham on 22 February to tell the Army that if **Benghazi** port could not be effectively defended the **Navy** could not use it. —Cunningham, p. 310. See also Wavell's statement, p. 478.

⁷ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 215.

This being the case, it is easy to understand why Wavell thought that the final reasons for the Greek campaign were political and psychological. It also explains the advice given by Dill to General Auchinleck on 26 June 1941. After discussing the different factors which had influenced Wavell in the preceding months, Dill said: 'The fact is that the Commander in the field will always be subject to great and often undue pressure from his Government. **Wellington** suffered from it: Haig suffered from it: Wavell suffered from it. Nothing will stop it. In fact, pressure from those who alone see the picture as a whole and carry the main responsibility may be necessary the pressure often comes from very broad political considerations; these are sometimes so powerful as to make it necessary to take risks which from the purely military point of view, may seem inadvisable.' ¹

If studied from this angle the expedition to **Greece** may be explained. For the breadth and complexity of modern warfare can create demands

which military leaders are not always qualified to assess and coordinate. Men, resources and national morale—all controlled by politicians—are more important than ever before. Consequently it cannot be expected that the politicians should fall silent once mobilisation begins and remain silent until the commanders have completed their tasks. Military and political action must go hand in hand.

In any case, democracies do not always act on purely military considerations, otherwise they would not be democracies. Hence the statement by Admiral Cunningham: ‘we had encouraged the Greeks in their resistance to the Italians, and it seemed all wrong to desert them now.’²

Another factor of political importance was the strategic situation in the spring of 1941. The fighting spirit of **Britain** was then magnificent but Mr Churchill—and many cold-blooded unromantic observers—knew that she had no chance whatsoever of winning the war by her own unaided efforts. Allies had to be found and it was no use stalling for time, for opportunity seldom knocks at the door; statesmen, like other mortals, have to knock at its door. Mr Churchill had, therefore, been cultivating the friendship of the **United States**. In May 1940 he had begun his confidential correspondence with Mr Roosevelt and accepted the loan of fifty destroyers. In February–March 1941, when the conferences were taking place in **Athens**, the Lend-Lease Bill had been before Congress. So much depended upon it that on 28 February he cabled to Mr Hopkins: ‘Let me know when the Bill will be through.

¹ J. R. M. Butler, *Grand Strategy*, Vol. II (September 1939–June 1941), p. 531,

² Cunningham, p. 320.

The strain is growing here.’ On 7 March, when **Britain** finally decided to support **Greece**, the bill was still before Congress, but it was passed two days later and Churchill could cable: ‘Thank God for your news.’¹

But this was not sufficient, for the great majority of the American people, though sympathetic towards **Britain**, were still anxious to keep out of the war. This explains why Mr Churchill had thought of American opinion before supporting **Greece** and why he was hopeful, after the evacuation, that the risks taken to support an ally had appealed to the Americans. Mr Roosevelt certainly described it as 'a wholly justified action', but the next step in the 'wooing', ² the signing of the Atlantic Charter, did not take place until August 1941. And it was not until 7 December that the Japanese, by bombing **Pearl Harbour**, ensured the entry of the **United States** into the war. **America's** policy of isolation and the overall situation in 1941 are therefore some justification for Churchill's determined efforts to win the respect and sympathy of the **United States**. ³

The desperate isolation of **Britain** will also explain Churchill's desire to create a **Balkan** front 'with effects upon **Russia** which could not be measured by us.' **Greece** and **Turkey** were openly friendly. **Rumania** had lined up with **Germany** but the other states were hesitant, as was obvious from the moves and counter-moves in the months immediately before the despatch of the expedition. **Bulgaria** had signed a treaty of friendship and non-aggression with **Turkey** on 17 February and did not adhere to the Tripartite Pact until 1 March. **Hungary** had been an adherent in November 1940 but she had also, the following month, signed a pact of friendship with **Yugoslavia**. That country, bereft of her alliance with **France** and suspicious of Italian designs, had, on 25 June, re-established diplomatic relations with **Russia**, the ancient guarantor of **Serbia**. In other ways, however, **Russia** had remained the incalculable factor. Apparently indifferent to the fate of the western powers, she had permitted **Hitler** to dominate **Rumania** and **Bulgaria**; instead of declaring war upon **Germany**, it seemed more likely that she would attempt to grab her share of the British Empire. Yet there were many who simply could not believe that she had so easily forgotten her pan-Slav sympathies and her age-old ambitions in south-east **Europe**.

All the same, it was a distinctly intricate mosaic and the chances of its arrangement according to the British pattern were not very great. The best that could be done was to prevent **Hitler** creating

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 111.

² Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 282. On 8 December, the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbour, Churchill was no longer cautious. 'Oh, that is the way we talked to her while we were wooing her; now that she is in the harem, we talk to her quite differently.'

³ See p. 112 for references to **Hitler** and the **United States**.

a group of **Balkan** states subservient to the Axis. Consequently, when **Yugoslavia** staged her *coup d'état* and refused to become a German satellite, **Britain** increased her efforts to assist her. No support came from **Hungary**, in fact the pro-German element arranged for the movement of German troops towards **Yugoslavia**, but the suicide of the Hungarian premier on 2 April was 'a sacrifice to absolve himself and his people from guilt in the German attack upon **Yugoslavia**.' ¹

The reaction of **Russia** was not immediate but it did show that she was still interested in the **Balkans**. On the night of 5–6 April, only a few hours before **Yugoslavia** was invaded, Stalin had signed a non-aggression pact with **Yugoslavia** and, to the annoyance of **Hitler**, it contained a clause for friendly relations in the event of war. Actually it was little more than a gesture; **Russia** or, more particularly, Stalin, preferred a policy of appeasement.

In any case, it was not what Stalin thought of **Germany** but what **Hitler** thought of **Russia** that mattered, and on this subject British opinion was undecided but always hopeful. **Sir Stafford Cripps** ² had for months predicted that **Hitler** would attack **Russia** in the spring of 1941. The Joint Intelligence Committee, ³ on the other hand, were inclined to

think that his main task for 1941 would be the invasion of **Britain**.⁴ As for Mr Churchill, he waited hopefully until the end of March when the reported movements of panzer divisions, before and after the *coup d'état* in **Yugoslavia**, convinced him that **Russia** would eventually be invaded. In a note to Mr Eden, who was still in **Athens**, on 30 March he suggested that **Yugoslavia** or **Turkey** was about to be invaded and then added this deduction: 'Bear will be kept waiting a bit. Furthermore, these orders and counter-orders in their relation to the Belgrade *coup* seem to reveal magnitude of design both towards south-east and east. This is the clearest indication we have had so far. Let me know in guarded terms whether you and Dill agree with my impressions.'⁵

The wording of this message suggests that Russo-German enmity was definitely one of the 'broad political considerations' for which risks had to be taken.

This must not be forgotten, for the expedition, quite apart from the battle casualties, was most costly. After making every effort to build up supply bases for a long campaign the British brought

¹ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 148. Restricted independence was maintained until the German occupation in March 1944.

² Barbarossa; the origins and development of **Hitler's** plan to attack **Russia**'; unpublished monograph by E. M. Robertson, Enemy Documents Section, Cabinet Office, **London**.

³ Churchill, Vol. III, p. 318.

⁴ In April 1941, when Churchill proposed to increase the number of tanks he was about to send through the **Mediterranean** to the **Middle East**, Dill disagreed 'in view of the shortage for Home Defence.'—*Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁵ Churchill, Vol. III, pp. 319–20.

away no artillery, no heavy equipment and none of the 8000 vehicles which would have been so useful in the **Western Desert**. The **Navy** had lost the destroyers *Diamond* and *Wryneck*; the transports *Ulster Prince*, *Pennland*, *Slamat* and *Costa Rica* had been sunk; and the landing ship *Glennearn* had been damaged. In addition the Air Force had lost 209 aircraft. More important still, the movement of men and equipment to **Greece** had made possible the rapid advance of the Axis forces in **Cyrenaica**.

The evacuation of the Force from **Greece** and this unexpected threat in the **Western Desert** so disturbed the country that the British Government decided to ask for a vote of confidence. In the debate on 6 and 7 May its overall conduct of the war was criticised from many angles, but the actual decision to send the expedition to **Greece** was accepted as natural and honourable, so much so that the House divided 447 for and only 3 against. Once again political rather than military factors had decided the issue. For Mr Churchill in his defence said: 'Looking back on the sad course of events, I can only feel, as the Prime Minister of New Zealand has so nobly declared, that if we had again to tread the stony path, even with the knowledge we possess today, I for one would do the same thing again, and this is the view of all my colleagues in the War Cabinet and on the Defence Committee.' ¹

His reward came long afterwards when it was learnt that the aggressive policy of the Government had made it impossible for **Hitler** to enjoy all the advantages of his dominant position in **Europe**. On the principle that it was better to do something rather than do nothing, they had harassed the Germans wherever possible. And as a result, 'striking powers for Barbarossa' ² had been sacrificed because the Germans feared British diversions on the French coast and in **Norway** and were forced to support the Italians in North **Africa**.

Their refusal to permit the peaceful occupation of the **Balkans** had similar results. On 17 March **Hitler**, as a result of the movement of **W Force to Greece**, decided that **MARITA** (the Greek campaign) must give him

air supremacy over the Eastern Mediterranean. This meant the occupation not only of northern **Greece** but also of **Attica** and probably the entire **Peloponnese**. Larger forces had therefore to be employed and that, in turn, had meant the employment ³ of forces previously allocated to **BARBAROSSA** (the Russian campaign).

The resistance of **Yugoslavia** had a still greater influence on German war policy. **Hitler** had always known that he would even-

¹ House of Commons Debates, 6 and 7 May 1941.

² Halder's Diary.

³ Ibid.

tually need the Yugoslav transport system if he was to transfer his divisions from **Greece** to the Russian front, but he had expected to be given the use of it through the adherence of **Yugoslavia** to the Tripartite Pact. After the *coup d'état*—for which British diplomacy and the expedition to **Greece** may have been partly responsible ¹—this could no longer be expected and, furthermore, there was always the danger of a hostile and pro-Russian **Yugoslavia** to the rear of his armies on the Russian front. Faced with this threat, **Hitler** could not avoid a campaign in **Yugoslavia**. As he explained to Mussolini on 27 March, the position was not catastrophic but it was a difficult one and they had to avoid any mistake, otherwise, in the end, their whole position would be endangered. Plans were drawn up that night for Operation 25 (the Yugoslav campaign);

MARITA

was revised; and

BARBAROSSA

was postponed for four weeks. ² On 7 April, when the plans for the changeover from Operation 25 to

were complete, the date was altered to 'about 22 June', a postponement of over five weeks.

It has been suggested that **Hitler** might have attacked before that date had it not been for the unusually heavy rain in May which prevented any armoured offensive until the second week in June. Consequently there is no exact estimate of the time which he lost because of his **Balkan** campaign. The most reliable German authorities thought that 'the friction in the **Balkans** and the exceptional weather in 1941 caused the loss of four precious weeks.'³ In the opinion of Mr Churchill, 'a delay of five weeks was imposed upon the supreme operation as the result of our resistance in the **Balkans**, and especially of the Yugoslav revolution. No one can measure exactly what consequences this had before winter set in upon the fortunes of the German-Russian campaign. It is reasonable to believe that **Moscow** was saved thereby.'⁴

Another result of **Hitler's** enforced intervention in the **Balkans** was the gradual development of strong resistance movements in both **Greece** and **Yugoslavia**. In the latter particularly, the partisans led by Marshal Tito fought a guerrilla war similar to that by which Spanish patriots had crippled Napoleon's army in the Peninsula. It became another running sore, so ugly that by 1945, when **Hitler's** armies were fighting desperately to hold several crumbling fronts, he still had to have a dozen German divisions scattered throughout **Yugoslavia**.

¹ Goering afterwards talked of Russian influence and extensive financial backing 'on the part of England'. See N.D., Vol. IX, p. 33.

² See p. 158.

³ F. Halder, Chief of the General Staff; G. Blumentritt, Chief of Staff of the *Fourth Army* in **Poland**.

This fact afterwards led General Wilson to point out the similarity of the Corunna campaign of 1808 to the Greek campaign of 1941: ‘the effect of the appearance of a small British force on the strategy of a superior force engaged in aggression; the fury of a Dictator, causing him to commit larger forces than the situation demanded; the British retreat over similar terrain and covering the same distance; in both cases the miscalculation by H.M. Government as to the degree of resistance to be expected from the Allies which the expedition was intended to assist; finally its far-reaching after effects on the war in **Europe**.’¹ To complete the comparison he could have pointed out that sea power had made possible the successful evacuation of each expeditionary force.

It could be argued that these results were unpredictable; that those who use them to justify the expedition are simply being wise after the event. But it would be unjust to Churchill, Eden, Smuts and the senior commanders in the **Middle East** to make such statements without studying the situation as it was early in 1941. Because the friendship of possible allies had to be cultivated, decisions were made for ethical and political as well as for military reasons. **Britain** could not stand aside and permit **Germany** to overrun the **Balkans** and to threaten the future of **Turkey** and the **Middle East**. Nor could she assume that there was no chance of a **Balkan** front and no fundamental antagonism between Nazi Germany and Soviet **Russia**. Risks had to be taken to get possible results in the future. The costly evacuation and the failure of the **Balkan** powers to take ‘simultaneous action’ were certainly disappointing. But the expedition does seem to have impressed Mr Roosevelt; it helped to create that unstable **Balkan** front to which **Hitler** was forever sending men and equipment; it was a threat to German security at a most awkward time and place; and it had considerable influence upon the course of the war in **Russia**. As a long-term investment it was therefore well worth the risks which had been taken.

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APPENDIX I – STRENGTHS AND CASUALTIES

Appendix I

Strengths and Casualties

THE German losses in the Balkan campaign as announced by Hitler were 1160 killed, 3755 wounded and 365 missing. ¹

As the records of the campaign are incomplete, it is now impossible to state exactly how many British, Australian or New Zealand troops took part. Nor is it known for certain just how many were evacuated or how many were casualties and prisoners of war. So far as can be determined by the Historical Section of the United Kingdom Cabinet Office, the strengths and casualties of the forces were:

	<i>Strength</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Wounded</i>	<i>Prisoners</i>
British Army	21,880	146	87	6,480
Palestinians and Cypriots	4,670	36	25	3,806
RAF	2,217	110	45	28
Australian	17,125	320	494	2,030
New Zealand	16,720	291	599	1,614
		903	1,250	13,958
TOTAL	62,612		16,111	

The embarkation figures in the naval reports do not always agree with these totals, but the differences are understandable if it is remembered that the embarkations took place at night and in great haste and that among those evacuated there were Greeks and refugees.

	EMBARKATIONS					
<i>Night</i>	<i>Kalamata</i>	<i>Monemvasia</i>	<i>Tolos</i>	<i>Rafina and Megara</i>	<i>Kithira</i>	<i>Milos</i>
<i>April</i>			<i>Navplion</i>	<i>Porto Rafti</i>		
24–25			6,685	5,700		
25–26					5,900	
26–27	8,650		4,527	8,223		
27–28				4,640		

28-29	332	4,320				760	
29-30	33						
30-1	202						700
May							
	9,217	4,320	11,212	18,563	5,900	760	700
		Total embarked			50,672		
		Less loss in <i>Slamat</i>			500		
					50,172		

The number of New Zealanders who missed evacuation but eventually escaped from Greece is not known. On 10 May 1941 it was estimated that 2900 New Zealanders were killed or missing, and since the final casualty figures for all categories totalled 2504 it can be argued that at least 400 men left the country by their own efforts or with the assistance of the Greeks. The figures may even be higher for by 10 May some had already found their way to Crete.

The New Zealand casualties by units were as follows:

Unit	Killed in Action and Wounded Prisoners Died of Wounds			Included in Prisoners	Total
HQ NZ Div <i>Divisional Troops:</i>	2	5	10	(2 W)	17
2 Div Cav Regt	7	12	49	(2 W, 4 DOW)	68
4 Fd Regt	4	16	69	(5 W, 3 DOW)	89
5 Fd Regt	3	7	36	(4 W)	46
6 Fd Regt	2	14	23	(2 W, 1 DOW)	39
7 A-Tk Regt	18	22	73	(11 W, 1 DOW)	113
5 Fd Pk Coy		2	3		5
6 Fd Coy	17	11	121	(13 W, 1 DOW)	149

7 Fd Coy	3	3	19	(5 W)	25
19 A Tps Coy			11	(1 W)	11
2 Div Sigs	3	11	25	(1 W)	39
27 MG Bn	8	13	33	(4 W)	54
4 NZ Inf Bde:					
Bde HQ		2	4	(1 W)	6
18 Bn	21	42	117	(15 W, 5 DOW)	180
19 Bn	24	20	149	(17 W)	193
20 Bn	24	45	80	(10 W, 1 DOW)	149
(Total 4 Bde)	(69)	(109)	(350)		(528)
5 NZ Inf Bde:					
Bde HQ					
21 Bn	14	26	235	(9 W, 1 DOW)	275
22 Bn	12	19	22	(4 W)	53
23 Bn	9	8	36	(5 W, 1 DOW)	53
28 Maori Bn	10	6	100	(11 W, 2 DOW)	116
(Total 5 Bde)	(45)	(59)	(393)		(497)
6 NZ Inf Bde:					
Bde HQ	2	1			3
24 Bn	8	6	138	(6 W, 2 DOW)	152
25 Bn	16	13	159	(47 W, 4 DOW)	188
26 Bn	15	32	57	(8 W, 2 DOW)	104
(Total 6 Bde)	(41)	(52)	(354)		(447)
NZASC (all units & att)	26	33	116	(21 W, 1 DOW)	175
NZOC	3	3	7	(2 W)	13
NZMC (all units & att)	8	5	107	(1 W)	120

Misc units	2	10	57	(5 W, 1 DOW)	69
TOTAL	261	387	1856	(212 W, 30 DOW)	2504

W = Wounded.

**DOW = Died
of Wounds.**

The Australian losses were 320 killed, 494 wounded and 2030 prisoners of war, the last total including men who were wounded before being made prisoner or who died of wounds in enemy hands. The losses of the infantry and artillery units of 6 Australian Division were:

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Killed Wounded Prisoners</i>		
2/1 Bn	16	17	51
2/2 Bn	14	16	112
2/3 Bn	12	31	62
2/5 Bn	21	26	47
2/6 Bn	28	43	217
2/7 Bn	7	13	73
2/4 Bn	26	38	163
2/8 Bn	21	33	106
2/11 Bn	32	32	37
2/1 MG Bn		5	7
2/1 Fd Regt	6	7	60
2/2 Fd Regt	11	10	23
2/3 Fd Regt	7	17	2
2/1 A-Tk Regt	18	16	79
TOTAL	219	304	1039

The British infantry, armoured and mobile artillery units had the following casualties:

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Casualties (all Categories)</i>
3 RTR	289
4 Hussars	465
1 Rangers	198
2 RHA	113
102 A-Tk Regt	277

64 Med Regt	53
7 Med Regt	181
106 Lt AA Regt (or Bty?)	177

1753

And, quite apart from those in the Palestinian, Cypriot and Royal Air Force units, there were the 4960 casualties in the base, line-of-communication and other non-fighting units. This high total is yet another proof that **Britain had been seriously attempting to establish in **Greece** the base for a long campaign in the **Balkans**.**

¹ **'The Balkan Campaign of *12 Army*', p. 45.**

TO GREECE

APPENDIX II – THE INTER-SERVICES COMMITTEE'S REPORT

Appendix II

The Inter-Services Committee's Report

AFTER the campaign in **Greece**, General Wilson wrote a report that came under the scrutiny of an Inter-services Committee established for that purpose. Mr Fraser was then in **Cairo** and took the opportunity of asking the Committee to consider two questions raised by some officers of the New Zealand Division. The first was whether the New Zealand group involved in the disaster at **Kalamata** had received embarkation orders. The Committee laboured under the impression that this group, chiefly the Reinforcement Battalion, had been ordered directly from **Voula** to **Kalamata**, and its finding concerned rather the disaster at **Kalamata** than the material issue of the orders, or lack of them. The fate of the Reinforcement Battalion has been related, ¹ and it is necessary to mention here only that it was directed into a group ² of Force Troops under the command of Headquarters W Force. Responsibility for the movement of the battalion was then assumed by Movement Control, which, in the reorganisation that was necessary after the decision ³ to evacuate more troops from the **Peloponnese**, directed it to move from **Navplion** to **Kalamata**.

The second question was directed to the divisional command. The Committee heard evidence from **General Freyberg**, Brigadiers Puttick and Hargest, and Colonel Stewart. It found that, 'On the whole, divisional control appears to have worked satisfactorily.' There was one period, however, when control became difficult. This was during the withdrawal from the **Olympus** positions to **Thermopylae**. As 6 Brigade was still in action at **Elasson** and Allen Force at **Pinios**, **General Freyberg** decided to remain forward together with his GSO I, Colonel Stewart, delegating to Brigadier Puttick the task of sorting out the units of the Division as they arrived at **Thermopylae**. The BGS Anzac Corps was to

meet Puttick and was to allot positions.

It is shown in **Chapter 13** ⁴ how the original plan, that New Zealand troops should use the coast road while Australian troops used the main road, broke down. It has also been shown how confusion during the withdrawal was increased by well-intentioned officers diverting troops along roads which were marked on the maps as linking the two divisional routes but which in fact petered out between them. It was in these circumstances that 'a measure of control was lost', a situation which the Committee found was due to 'unavoidable misfortunes'. The Committee agreed with Colonel Stewart that it would have been better had he gone back to operate a co-ordinating headquarters at **Thermopylae** for Brigadier Puttick, leaving the GSO II to assist **General Freyberg** in the forward area.

The Committee discussed the 'usual criticism' levelled against a divisional commander, that he is too often away from his headquarters, or that he does not leave it enough. It was 'strongly of the opinion that provided he does not tire himself unduly, the fault of going forward too often is the better of the two.' In this particular case there was 'ample evidence to prove ... that **General Freyberg**, by his presence in the forward area at difficult moments, was personally responsible for putting new heart into commanders and for stemming what might have developed into a rot.' A divisional commander must, the Committee added, ensure that when he does go forward his GSO I remains behind with a clear knowledge of his general intentions.

Mr Fraser, in the circumstances, was bound to seek the guidance of outside opinion to settle in his own mind doubts concerning **Freyberg's** competence. He did not relax his responsibility for ensuring that New Zealand's one division was suitably commanded until September in the same year, when inquiries made to Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Generals Auchinleck and Wavell elicited reassuring opinions. Wavell stated that **Freyberg** had produced one of the best trained and disciplined and fittest divisions he had seen, and must be given the fullest credit for its performance in **Greece** and Crete.

Auchinleck regarded him as a first-class divisional commander. These opinions, as a background to the personal qualities of **General Freyberg himself, cemented the successful partnership between statesman and soldier that lasted until the end of the war.**

¹ See pp. 448– 59.

² **4 Hussars, 3 Royal Tanks, New Zealand and Australian Reinforcement Battalions.**

³ See p. 406.

⁴ See pp. 288– 92.

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APPENDIX III – MR FRASER'S QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE UNITED KINGDOM CHIEFS OF STAFF ON THE CAMPAIGNS IN GREECE AND CRETE

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PART I. GREECE

Part I. GREECE

Question 1

What were the grounds for believing that three Divisions and an Armoured Brigade, plus the Greeks, could hold an unlimited number of German divisions, fully mechanised and armoured—plus the Italians?

Question 2

*Was an attack against us through the **Monastir** gap contemplated as a possibility, a probability or a certainty?*

Question 3

If so, what confidence could have been placed in the Aliakhmon line on which our plan was based and which, in effect, was never fought?

NOTE: *The above questions are asked not by way of criticism, for the operation was necessary (unless militarily quite impossible) for non-military, political and moral reasons, and the **New Zealand Government**, as they have already stated more than once, would take the same course again in the same circumstances.*

Answers to Questions 1, 2 and 3

1. Early in January 1941 information in the possession of His Majesty's Government seemed to show that the Germans, who were rapidly concentrating large forces in Roumania, intended an early advance through **Bulgaria** against **Greece**. It appeared most unlikely that they would move through **Yugoslavia**, their plan being probably to coerce **Yugoslavia** into submission by surrounding her. Furthermore, an attack on **Yugoslavia** would jeopardise the rear of the Italian army facing the Greeks.
2. Operations in **Libya** were proceeding satisfactorily and the early fall

of **Tobruk** was expected.

3. Accordingly, a telegram was sent on the 10th January, 1941, to the Commanders-in-Chief in the **Middle East** telling them that everything pointed to an early German advance in the **Balkans** and that His Majesty's Government had decided that it was essential to offer the Greeks the maximum possible assistance with the object of ensuring that they would resist German demands by force. The giving of assistance to **Greece** would have to take priority over all operations in the **Middle East** after the capture of **Tobruk**, though this need not prevent an advance to **Benghazi** if the going were good. It was proposed that our assistance to the Greeks should take the form of specialist and mechanised units and air forces to support the Greek divisions, rather than a large expeditionary force, which we could not provide. The Commanders-in-Chief were invited to telegraph their intentions after discussing matters with General Metaxas.
4. General Wavell and Air Marshal Longmore went to **Greece** and held discussions with the **Greek Government** and Commander-in-Chief on the 15th and 16th January. In the course of these discussions, General Wavell informed General Metaxas of what His Majesty's Government proposed, and suggested that the despatch of a number of specialist troops to **Salonika** would enable the Greeks on that front to offer strong resistance to any German advance which, in view of the nature of the country, would not be in overwhelming numbers, and that the despatch of these troops would convince the Turkish and Yugoslav Governments of our determination to support the Greeks to the utmost and to resist any advance on **Salonika**. If we did nothing, on the other hand, the enemy, seeing **Salonika** weakly defended, would be encouraged to attempt a rapid advance to seize the port, and **Turkey** and **Yugoslavia** would be discouraged from taking any action.
5. General Metaxas did not accept this view. He thought that the despatch of these troops, while not sufficient to ensure the safety of **Salonika**, would provoke **Germany** into attack. He thought that we should postpone sending assistance to the Greeks until we could land in sufficient numbers to act offensively as well as defensively. General Metaxas also refused an offer of assistance against the Italians.
6. In view of the Greek attitude, the Commanders-in-Chief were instructed on the 21st January that our future policy should be:
 - (To complete the capture of **Cyrenaica**.
 - a)

(To capture the **Dodecanese**.

b)

(To form a strong reserve in Egypt, with particular reference
c) to the rendering of assistance to **Turkey** or **Greece**, within the
next two months.

7. His Majesty's Government were still very much impressed with the
urgent need of taking action—

(To stiffen the attitude of the **Balkan** countries, particularly
a) **Turkey**.

(To threaten **Germany** in Roumania, and to prevent the
b) Germans gaining control of the **Balkans** without firing a shot.

8. Accordingly, on 31st January, 1941, the Prime Minister addressed a
personal telegram to the President of the Turkish Republic urging
him to agree to allow us to infiltrate considerable air forces into
Turkey, by the same method that the Germans were employing in
Bulgaria. By so doing we should enable the Turks to deter **Germany**
from overrunning **Bulgaria** and quelling **Greece**, and we should
counterbalance the Russian fear of the German armies. On the 7th
February, a reply was received from the President of the Turkish
Republic refusing this proposal but pressing for further supplies of
armaments for the Turkish army.

9. The situation in the **Balkans** continued to develop in such a way [as]
to show that a German attack on **Greece** could not be long delayed.
Following on the capture of **Benghazi**, anxious discussion took place
as to whether it would be better to continue the advance on the
North African shore in an attempt to take **Tripoli** or whether surplus
forces should be got ready for use in the **Balkans**. It was felt that if
Greece were attacked by the Germans and decided to resist, we could
not possibly refuse to help her. It was therefore thought to be
essential to find out what the Greek plan would be in the event of a
German threat, so that we could see how best to help. It was not
thought to be impossible for the Greeks and ourselves to hold up a
German advance down the Struma Valley, provided the Greeks were
able to disengage a few divisions from the Albanian front in time,
and if we could support them with air and mechanised forces. A
successful resistance might encourage the Turks, and possibly the
Yugoslavs, to join in the battle. When the matter came under
consideration on the 11th February, an assessment was made of the
possible course of the German campaign. On the assumption that
they would cross the Bulgarian frontier on the 17th February, it was
thought they might arrive on the Greek frontier by the 12th March

with five divisions, including one armoured division. Other forces would be retained to watch the Turks and the Yugoslavs. The state of the communications in **Bulgaria** at that time of year would not permit of larger forces being maintained forward. It was thought that the Greeks, supported by the forces we could get there by that date, might well be able to hold up this advance.

10. In order to examine thoroughly the possibilities; and to try and bind together the **Balkan** front, it was decided to send the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff out to the **Middle East**. They left on 12th February.
11. This was the background of the situation which confronted the Foreign Secretary, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the three Commanders-in-Chief when the former arrived in **Cairo** on the 19th February.
12. On the 20th February a brief appreciation of the German threat through **Bulgaria** was received in **Cairo** from General Papagos. He thought that, if **Yugoslavia** were to collaborate with the Greeks, the Germans would probably not make serious efforts down the Struma Valley, owing to the vulnerability of this line to attack from **Yugoslavia**. Under these conditions the possibility of holding the Greek-Bulgarian frontier might be seriously considered. On the other hand, if **Yugoslavia** remained neutral, **Salonika** would have to be abandoned. Within 10 or 15 days of crossing the Danube the Germans could have 8 or 9 divisions on the Greek frontier, of which three might be in the area of the **Rupel Pass**. The Germans might even violate Yugoslav territory and move down the Vardar Valley as well. The success of a German thrust in this area would cut off all troops in Eastern **Macedonia**. For these reasons he had seriously to consider the necessity of withdrawing Greek divisions now from Eastern Macedonia to the Aliakhmon position. He hoped that before the German offensive began he would have reached in **Albania** the line Berat-Valona. He would then be able to economise troops and make more available for the defence of North-East **Greece**. In the meanwhile, he was concentrating two newly-formed divisions in the **Florina-Edessa-Veria** area. Under no circumstances would **Greece** make a separate peace with **Germany**.
13. On the 21st February the Foreign Secretary telegraphed from **Cairo**, after full discussions with the three Commanders-in-Chief. He said that all were agreed that we should do everything in our power to bring the fullest measure of help to the Greeks at the earliest possible moment. If our help was accepted by the Greeks, it was believed that there was a fair chance of halting a German advance and preventing **Greece** from being overrun. The present limited air

forces available made it doubtful whether we could hold a line covering **Salonika**, but the position to be held would be discussed with the Greeks. In reply, the Prime Minister telegraphed: 'Do not consider yourselves obligated to a Greek enterprise if in your hearts you feel it will only be another Norwegian fiasco. If no good plan can be made, please say so. But, of course, you know how valuable success would be.' On the same day the Foreign Secretary telegraphed again as follows: 'It is, of course, a gamble to send forces to the mainland of **Europe** to fight **Germany** at this time. No one can give a guarantee of success, but when we discussed this matter in **London** we were prepared to run the risk of failure, thinking it better to suffer with the Greeks than to make no attempt to help them. That is the conviction we all hold here. Moreover, though the campaign is a daring venture, we are not without hope that it might succeed to the extent of halting the Germans before they overrun all **Greece**. It has to be remembered that the stakes are big. If we fail to help the Greeks, there is no hope of action by **Yugoslavia**, and the future of **Turkey** may easily be compromised. Though, therefore, none of us can guarantee that we may not have to play trump cards of our bare strong suit, we believe that this attempt to help **Greece** should be made.'

14. Full discussions were then held with the Greeks. These were recorded by the Foreign Secretary in a telegram, of which the following is an extract: '3. The President of Council, after reaffirming the determination of **Greece** to defend herself against **Germany**, reiterated the misgivings of the **Greek Government** lest insufficient British help should merely precipitate German attack, and stated that it was essential to determine whether available Greek forces and forces which we could provide would suffice to constitute efficacious resistance to the Germans, taking into account the doubtful attitude of **Turkey** and **Yugoslavia**. Before the Greek Government committed themselves, the President of Council therefore wished the military experts to consider the situation in the light of the British offer. I made plain the logical conclusion of the attitude taken up by the President of Council. If we were to delay action for fear of provoking the Germans, such action must inevitably be too late. '4. From the ensuing discussion between the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Commander-in-Chief, **Middle East**, and Air Officer Commanding, on the one hand, and General Papagos, on the other hand, it emerged that, in view of the doubtful attitude of **Yugoslavia**, the only line that could be held and would give time for withdrawal of troops from **Albania** would be a line west of the Vardar, **Olympus**-**Veria**-**Edessa**-**Kajmakcalan**. If we could be

sure of Yugoslav moves, it should be possible to hold a line further north from the mouth of the Nestos to Beles, covering **Salonika**. It would be impracticable, unless **Yugoslavia** came in, to hold a line covering **Salonika** in view of exposure of Greek left flank to German attack. '5. In full agreement with the **Greek Government**, the following detailed decisions were reached:

(In view of the importance of the Yugoslav attitude as
a) affecting the deployment of troops in **Greece**, it was agreed that I should make a further effort to attempt to persuade the Yugoslav Government to play their part (see my telegrams Nos. 68 and 69).

(That the Greeks should at once make, and begin the
b) execution of, preparations to withdraw the advanced troops to the line which we should have to hold if the Yugoslavs were not willing to come in.

(That work should immediately be started on improving
c) communications in **Greece** to facilitate the occupation of this line.

(That the movement of British troops should begin forthwith,
d) time being the main essence of the problem. The utmost secrecy to be preserved and deceptive stratagem devised.'

These proposals were approved by the War Cabinet on the 24th February, Mr Menzies being present.

15. The Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff then visited **Turkey**, returning to **Greece** on the 4th March just as the first flight of British troops was sailing from Egypt for **Greece**. The Germans had in the meanwhile entered **Bulgaria** (1st March, 1941). They found a changed and disturbing situation. General Papagos had not withdrawn any of his forces from Eastern Macedonia to the Aliakhmon line, as agreed upon at the previous meeting, and now stated that, in view of the German entry into **Bulgaria**, a withdrawal was no longer possible, since his troops would risk being caught on the move. He also said that it was quite impossible to make any withdrawals from the Albanian front, since his troops there were all exhausted and greatly outnumbered. Very serious discussions then took place as to what should be done. It was eventually agreed as follows:

(i) The Greek army will leave in **Macedonia** three divisions to defend the prepared position on the Nestos-Rupel line.

(ii) The Greek army will concentrate with all possible speed on the position **Mount Olympus-Veria-Edessa-Kajmakalan** (called the Aliakhmon position) the following forces: 12th Division from Western Thrace. 20th Division from **Florina**. 19th Motorised

(iii) ~~Division from Larissa. 7 battalions from Western Thrace.~~
The British forces will be despatched as rapidly as shipping will permit to Piraeus and Volos. They will concentrate on the Aliakhmon position on which it is intended that Graeco-British forces should be able to battle.

The view taken in these discussions of the Military problem is shown by the following telegram which was sent home by the Foreign Secretary on the 5th March:

- '1. Military problem is essentially one of time and space.
- '2. Reports from Bulgaria suggest that the Germans may arrive on the Greek frontier in sufficient strength to deliver an attack during the next six or seven days. Rate of German advance will of course depend on the weather, and the date of attack may also be affected by need of building up dumps of supplies and ammunition near the Greek frontier.
- '3. Resistance which Greek divisions can be expected to put up in prepared positions on Nestos-Rupel line should delay the Germans for some days. There will then be further advance of 100 miles from Rupel Pass before contact is made on Aliakhmon position. Time required for this advance should be considerably increased by demolitions which Wilson will prepare as rapidly as possible.
- '4. Concentration of three Greek divisions on Aliakhmon position should be complete within five days. The seven battalions from Thrace require a further five or six days to complete concentration. Aliakhmon position itself needs considerable work on communications and defences.
- '5. Concentration of British forces on Aliakhmon position will be as follows: Bulk of one armoured brigade and one New Zealand infantry brigade between the 16th and 19th March. Bulk of a second New Zealand infantry brigade about the 26th March. New Zealand infantry division should be complete in essential men and weapons by the end of March. Subsequent programme is not yet arranged.
- '6. All possible measures are being examined to speed up the programme, including the use of Greek ships for transport of British forces from Egypt.
- '7. The question of bombing German communications in Bulgaria was discussed yesterday with the Greeks. Their attitude is that, to avoid retaliation, no attack should be made during concentration of Anglo-Greek forces. If, however, Germany attacks Greece by land or air during this concentration, bombing

will begin at once.

'8. Thus the margin is narrow and the risk is considerable.

Nevertheless, as we stated in our telegram No. 313 of the 4th March, this risk appears to us the least dangerous of the three possibilities with which we were faced.' *

16. Anxious consideration was given to these telegrams when they were received in London, and the Chiefs of Staff prepared a commentary which is given in full below:

*** The other two possibilities referred to were:**

**(To dribble forces up to the Eastern Macedonian frontier,
a) which Papagos suggested should be done.**

**(To withdraw our offer of military support altogether.
b)**

'The following appear to us to be the principal changes in the situation since the decision was taken to go full speed ahead with the Greek enterprise:

'1. Our envoys, at their first interview with the King of Greece and General Papagos, reported that they were "greatly impressed by the attitude and spirit" of Papagos. At their recent interview they found him "unaccommodating and defeatist," though he appears to have cheered up towards the end. This change of attitude on the part of Papagos was perhaps only to be expected in view of the German arrival on the Graeco- Bulgar frontier and of the failure of any support from Yugoslavia or Turkey. Nevertheless, it is bound to react unfavourably on the fighting spirit of his army.

'2. The Greeks undertook on the 21st February to begin withdrawing their advance troops to the line which we should have to hold if the Yugoslavs were not willing to come in, and to start work immediately on improving communications in Greece to facilitate the occupation of this line. To-day (twelve days later) we learn that no withdrawal has commenced, and we gather that no work has been done. In view of the paramount importance of the time factor, this is serious.

'3. We were to have had 35 Greek Battalions to help us to hold the line. We are now told that we are to have three Greek divisions and seven battalions from Western Thrace, but that these only amount to 23 battalions at most. With the exception of the 12th Division these are all newly formed and have not yet fought. One

of the divisions can hardly have any guns, while the remainder can only have captured Italian material. But, in addition to the 35 battalions for which we had hoped, we had contemplated that the Greeks would be able to withdraw some divisions from their Albanian front. General Papagos now says that this cannot be done as they are "exhausted and outnumbered."

- '4. We have always contemplated that Mandibles ¹ would be captured before—or at least simultaneously with—the move to **Greece**. It now appears that Mandibles cannot be undertaken until the movement to **Greece** has been completed. This means that instead of being able to concentrate all available air forces against the German advance, considerable air operations will have to be conducted against Mandibles in order to protect our lines of communication to **Greece**.
- '5. The mining of the **Suez Canal** has become a more acute handicap. It was to have been open on the 3rd March, but the Germans put in ten more mines that day. The Canal is now completely closed, and on past form may not be clear until the 11th March. Only half of the M.T. ships required for the movement to **Greece** are North of the Canal, and all personnel ships are South of it. Even if the personnel for **Greece** are carried in men-of-war, the whole force cannot be dealt with in this manner. 'The Time Factor.
- '6. We have estimated that one armoured and three motorised divisions could reach the Bulgar-Greek frontier on the 5th March, and, in addition, an infantry division by the 11th March. We further estimate that, assuming weak delaying action by the Greeks in the Rupel area, the Germans could have two divisions on the Aliakhmon line by about the 15th March, and concentrate the whole five divisions there by the 22nd March.
- '7. We are now told that General Papagos intends to fight in the Rupel area with three divisions. Until we receive an answer to our telegram No. 64 * we have no means of knowing how much delay will be imposed on a German advance, since much will depend on the strength of the position, the equipment and morale of the Greek troops, and on whether an effective scheme of demolitions has been prepared and can be executed. If the delay imposed is short, we should at the best have one armoured brigade and one New Zealand brigade to oppose the first two German divisions on the Aliakhmon line. 'Conclusion.
- '8. Our conclusion is that the hazards of the enterprise have considerably increased. Nevertheless, despite our misgivings and our recognition of a worsening of the general situation, we are

not as yet in a position to question the military advice of those on the spot, who, in their latest telegram, describe the enterprise as not by any means hopeless.'

17. The above commentary was telegraphed out to the **Middle East** by the Prime Minister, who indicated to the Foreign Secretary that, in the light of the new information from **Athens**, it was unlikely that the War Cabinet would sanction the Greek enterprise. However, on the following day, the Foreign Secretary telegraphed in reply as follows: 'The Chief of the Imperial General Staff and I, in consultation with three Commanders-in-Chief, have this afternoon re-examined the question. We are unanimously agreed that, despite the heavy commitments and great risks which are undoubtedly involved, especially in view of our limited naval and air resources, the right decision was taken in **Athens**.' Later the same day the Chief of the Imperial General Staff telegraphed: 'General Wavell has explained to Generals Blamey and **Freyberg** additional risks involved in venture in **Greece** under existing situation. Both have expressed their willingness to undertake operations under new conditions.'
18. On the following day the matter was reviewed again by the Foreign Secretary, the Commanders-in-Chief and General Smuts, who was in **Cairo**. The Foreign Secretary telegraphed:
- 'While we are all conscious of the gravity of the decision, we can find no reason to vary our proposed judgment.... The collapse of **Greece**

* A telegram asking whether Commanders-in-Chief agreed with the estimate time table given in paragraph 6, and for information about Greek positions and intentions and whether Allied forces would arrive on the Aliakhmon line in time to hold it.

without further effort on our part to save her by intervention on land after the Libyan victories, which had, as all the world knows, made forces available, would be the greatest calamity. **Yugoslavia** would then certainly be lost, nor could we feel confident that even **Turkey** would have the strength to remain steadfast if the Germans and Italians were established in **Greece**, without the effort on our part to resist them.... Longmore points out that he is very short of aircraft, particularly fighters, and is by no means confident he can give adequate air support to the operation.... The struggle in the air

in this theatre will be a serious one. Longmore requires all the help that can be given. If he can hold his own, most of the dangers and difficulties of this enterprise will disappear.'

19. In the light of these telegrams, the Prime Minister telegraphed on the 7th March to the Foreign Secretary that the Cabinet had considered the projects in the light of the above telegrams. He said that the Chiefs of Staff advised that, in view of the steadfastly expressed opinion of Commanders-in-Chief on the spot, of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Commanders of the forces to be employed, it would be right to go on. The Cabinet accordingly had decided to authorise the operation to proceed. The above summary of the events leading up to the arrival of British and Imperial forces in **Greece** shows that there was full discussion of military plans between our Commanders and General Papagos, and that the dispositions taken up were based on an early advance, probably about the middle of March, by the Germans directed on **Salonika, Yugoslavia** at first remaining neutral. Under these conditions and in the weather likely to be experienced in March in that part of the world, it was felt that the Allied forces on the Aliakhmon line would have a good chance of withstanding the German attack. It was felt that, if the Germans decided to violate the neutrality of **Yugoslavia**, the latter would be able to hold the difficult passes in the South-east of the country and would be able to complete the destruction of the Italian Army in **Albania**; no early attack through the **Monastir Gap** was therefore thought to be likely.
20. The situation was somewhat changed by the *coup d'Etat* which took place in **Yugoslavia** on the 27th March and which caused a postponement in the German attack. It was still felt that the Yugoslavs would be able to hold a German advance from **Bulgaria** through the narrow valleys eminently suitable for anti-tank defence. Every effort was made to induce the Yugoslavs to take the initiative against the Italians before the Germans were ready to launch their attack and thus enable the Greeks, the Yugoslavs and ourselves to form a combined front against the Germans. These efforts failed; the Germans attacked **Yugoslavia** on the 7th April and rapidly broke through to the head of the **Monastir Gap**. The Yugoslavs proved incapable of any action against the Italians and, in consequence, there were not sufficient forces to close the gap in the Allied line.
21. It is worth remembering that, owing to the necessity for meeting the German advance in **Cyrenaica**, the forces which actually went to **Greece** consisted of only two Divisions and an Armoured Brigade. The whole of the 7th Australian Division and the **Polish Brigade** had

to be kept back. The Aliakhmon position was extremely strong and, on the assumption that either the Germans did not go through **Yugoslavia** or that the Yugoslavs would succeed in holding their advance through the mountainous country, there is nothing to show that the forces originally planned to hold the Line would not have been able to do so. The number of German Divisions which could be maintained for an invasion of **Greece** from **Bulgaria** was by no means unlimited, and the successful defence put up by weak Greek forces in the Rupel area shows what can be done by determined men in strong natural positions.

Question 4

*Was sufficient consideration given to the adequacy of our Air Force in **Greece**?*

Answer

1. Much anxious consideration was given to the question of air support for the operations in **Greece**. It was fully realised that, with the resources available, the R.A.F. would be hard put to it to hold their own against the Germans, who would not only be able to operate the full number of squadrons that could be accommodated in the aerodromes in **Bulgaria** and around **Salonika** after they had captured this place, but would be able to keep up a steady supply of replacements. The most that could be hoped was that we should be able to keep the effects of the enemy's air superiority to a minimum and to prevent them becoming such as to prejudice the holding of our positions.
2. We were not, of course, in a position to send forces at will. It was rather a case of considering how much must be retained for the protection of the **Suez Canal** and Fleet base and for operations in the **Western Desert**, where a German threat was developing. Having decided upon the minimum for these purposes, the remainder could go to **Greece**.
3. As it turned out, by the middle of April we had in **Greece**— 1 Heavy Bomber Squadron, 5 Medium Bomber Squadrons, 3 Fighter Squadrons, and 1 Army Co-operation Squadron. Total, 10 Squadrons. Our air forces in Egypt at that time consisted of only 12 Squadrons, including 2 Sunderland Flying Boat Squadrons. It will be seen, therefore, that to all intents and purposes our air forces in the Eastern Mediterranean were equally divided between **Greece** and Egypt.

4. We had been much hampered in preparing for air operations in **Greece** by lack of aerodromes. The Greeks were slow to realise the necessity to develop aerodromes and to provide facilities. We were not in a position to conscript labour and the work had to be done throughout the winter, when the weather was extremely adverse. The only aerodromes worthy of the name were Jannina and Paramythra on the Albanian front, and six in **Macedonia**, of which Trikala and **Larissa** were the best. The Germans were not handicapped in the same way after our withdrawal because, with the improvement in the weather, a number of other aerodromes became fit for use.
5. Taking into account all these factors, it was clear that the air situation in **Greece** in the event of a German attack would be most unsatisfactory, but could not by any means be improved. Having in mind the moral necessity of helping the Greeks to the utmost, the great prize at stake if the Germans could be held in the **Balkans** and the favourable nature of the country for military defence, it was felt by all in authority that the air situation must be accepted as part of the general risks of the campaign.
6. Viewing the campaign in retrospect, it must be remembered that the German advance through the **Monastir Gap** and the turning of the Aliakhmon line led to a retreat in the course of which aerodromes had to be hurriedly abandoned, the operations of our air forces in consequence being gravely handicapped. Moreover, the failure of the Yugoslavs to take any effective action against the Italians made it impossible for our forces to concentrate entirely against the Germans. In spite of these adverse factors, it was not until the closing stages that air attack on the troops began to cause serious results, and the successful evacuation shows that it was never decisive.

Question 5

*Could not and should not aerodromes in **Greece** have been destroyed prior to evacuation?*

Answer

1. At the time of the German attack, the Royal Air Force were using six main aerodromes in **Greece**, plus some advanced landing grounds and satellites. This number does not include aerodromes in the **Salonika** area, which we were never able to occupy, but it includes two which were used in support of the Albanian front. There seems to be considerable misapprehension as to what is involved in the

'destruction' of an aerodrome. A note on the subject has been included in the answer to Question 10 on Crete. The main points affecting the situation in Greece are that—

**(An aerodrome cannot be prepared for demolition while it is still
a) in use;**

**(A large number of technical troops, complete with equipment
b) and explosives, are required to deal with one aerodrome, and the work takes considerable time;**

**(The results of even a carefully planned and thoroughly
c) executed demolition of the aerodrome surface are purely temporary;**

**(The available Engineers were fully occupied on the vital work
d) of delaying the advance of the German forces—a matter of much more immediate importance than the doing of what, in the circumstances, could only be comparatively ineffective damage to aerodromes.**

2. In actual fact, the aerodromes in Greece were utilised by our own Air Forces right up to the time that they had to be abandoned to the enemy. It is doubtful whether more than 24 hours elapsed between the ending of our aerial activity at an aerodrome and the arrival of enemy forces. An exception is possibly the aerodromes behind the Albanian front, but in that area we had no forces who could have done the work.

¹ This was the code-name for an operation to capture Rhodes and certain other islands of the Dodecanese before the landing of Allied troops in Greece.

TO GREECE

PART II. CRETE

Part II. CRETE

Question 1

*When was it decided that **Crete** must be held?*

Question 2

After that decision, what steps were taken, and when, to render the Island defensible?

Question 3

- (a) *What consideration was given, and*
(b) *What steps were taken— for providing the troops charged with the defence of **Crete** with the necessary equipment—*
- (i) *Artillery;*
 - (ii) *Anti-aircraft artillery;*
 - (iii) *Ammunition of all types;*
 - (iv) *Rifles and automatic rifles;*
 - (v) *Transport;*
 - (vi) *Tanks;*
 - (vii) *Medical supplies and equipment;*
 - (viii) *Picks and shovels for digging in self-defence?*

NOTE: *To some extent no doubt these questions are answered by a report * on the matter supplied to me in the **Middle East**.*

Answers to Questions 1, 2 and 3.

1. **The importance of **Crete** as a naval base for our own use and as a point which should be denied to the enemy was realised before **Italy** came into the war, and forces were held ready in the **Middle East** to go there should **Greece** become involved. Consequently, as soon as **Italy** attacked **Greece**, we occupied the Island. On the 1st November, 1940, the Secretary of State for War, who was then in the **Middle East**, telegraphed home giving details of the forces which were being sent to **Crete**, and said: 'A further difficulty in basing aircraft in **Crete** is that **Crete** at present possesses only one aerodrome which can be made serviceable. **Crete** is very vulnerable to air attack not only from**

Italian bombers from **Libya** but also from fighters operating from the **Dodecanese**. If British squadrons are based on **Crete**, vulnerability of aerodrome must result in high percentage of losses on the ground.'

2. While the evacuation of **Greece** was still proceeding, General Wavell was informed from home that a heavy air-borne attack by German troops and bombers appeared likely to be made soon upon **Crete**. He was told that the Island was to be stubbornly defended. It was realised that, with the Germans in **Greece** and the **Dodecanese**, it might not be possible to use **Suda Bay** as a naval base on account of the scale of air attack which could be brought to bear, and because of the difficulty of operating sufficient fighters from the three landing grounds which by then were available. Moreover, the resources of the **Middle East**, especially after the losses which had occurred in **Greece**, did not permit of the allocation of that scale of anti-aircraft defence which experience in **Malta** showed would be necessary to provide reasonable security for the harbour and aerodromes. It was, however, judged essential, if by any means it could be achieved, to deny the use of **Crete** to the Germans.
3. A full account of the steps taken to make the Island defensible can only be given in the **Middle East**. The Commanders-in-Chief had been urged, ever since the first occupation, to strengthen the Island as much as possible, but it must be borne in mind that their resources were strained to the utmost by the campaigns in **Cyrenaica** and **Greece**, and while these campaigns were going on it was difficult for them to lock up tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft guns, transport, &c., on an Island which, at that time, was not a scene of active operations.
4. The situation in **Libya** was causing much anxiety during the period between the evacuation of **Greece** and the German attack on **Crete**. Great efforts were being made to build up sufficient forces to turn the tables on the Germans before they should become too strong and no doubt this hampered the Commander-in-Chief in his efforts to provide the large amount of equipment required to re-arm the troops which had arrived in **Crete** from **Greece**. Much of what was sent was sunk *en route* or in **Suda Bay** before it could be unloaded.
5. Little or nothing could be done from home to assist. The pipeline of aircraft, guns and equipment of all kinds flowing from the **United Kingdom** to the **Middle East** round the Cape was kept full and a number of hazardous operations were carried out to pass aircraft and tanks through the Mediterranean. General Wavell was urged to send as many tanks and artillery as he could spare to **Crete**, but, for the reasons mentioned above, the amount actually sent was small. Full details will only be available when reports from the **Middle East** are

received.

6. When weighing up the results of an operation such as the defence of **Crete**, it must be remembered that war cannot be conducted on the principle that only those enterprises in which success is certain should be undertaken. When the enemy holds the initiative, the pressure of events inevitably compels us from time to time to fight in positions and under conditions which are not in our favour. The alternative is to abandon, without a struggle, friends and allies, and to hand over important positions to the enemy without making him pay the price.
7. In the case of **Crete**, even if it had been decided to abandon the Island without fighting, it would hardly have been possible to do it. The large number of troops could not have been evacuated in the face of the enemy without losses almost as great as those sustained in the actual battle. It did not prove possible, in fact, to withdraw from the Island the 10,000 or so unarmed men who could contribute little or nothing to the defence. As will be seen from the answer to Question 7, good hopes were, in fact, entertained of being able to beat off the attack.

Question 4

In particular, was the question of air support adequately studied and what conclusions were come to?

NOTE: *It seems to be generally accepted now in the **Middle East** that infantry and artillery exposed to unrestricted air attack are in an impossible position; if this is an accepted fact now, it is difficult to understand (and the **New Zealand Government** and people would wish to understand it) why, in the light of operations in **Poland, France** and **Greece**, it was not an accepted fact before the decision to defend **Crete** was taken?*

Answer

1. The question of air support for **Crete** was fully studied. It was clearly realised by all the Commanders concerned and by the authorities at home that fighter aircraft could not be maintained on the Island in face of the scale of air attack which would be experienced. The Germans could concentrate against the Island the whole of the air

forces, short-range as well as long-range, which they could base in **Greece** and the **Dodecanese**. To deal with a really determined effort by these forces to dominate the air over **Crete** would have required a force of 15–20 Fighter Squadrons in **Crete**—a figure quite beyond our resources to provide or to operate. Even if such a force had been available, there would have been no possibility of making, even with years of labour, the aerodromes necessary to enable it to operate in a mountainous country like Crete. Still less would it have been possible to provide the vast number of anti-aircraft guns necessary for the defence of these aerodromes. To have maintained a token force of, say, 5 squadrons, would have been worse than useless; they would have been overwhelmed both in the air and on the ground, and would merely have added to our losses without result.

2. The Commanders in the **Middle East** decided that, as there was no possibility of establishing in **Crete** a fighter force of the size necessary to be effective, the proper course was to withdraw the small force of fighters stationed there and so save them from useless destruction. This decision was taken on the advice of **General Freyberg** and Group Captain Beamish, the local R.A.F. Commander, and no responsible authority has questioned its wisdom.

Question 5

Was the scale of attack sufficiently appreciated—

(a) *in the **United Kingdom**;*

(b) *in the **Middle East**?*

Answer

1. The scale of attack on **Crete** was fully appreciated in the **United Kingdom**, as can be seen from the following telegram which was sent to the **Middle East** on the 28th April: ‘German attack **Crete** by simultaneous airborne and seaborne expedition believed imminent. ‘Scale of airborne attack estimated 3,000/4,000 parachutists or airborne troops in first sortie. Two or three sorties per day possible from **Greece** and three or four from Rhodes, if Rhodes not used as dive-bomber base. All above with fighter escort. ‘Heavy bombing attacks to be expected immediately prior to arrival of air and seaborne troops. Main fighter and dive-bombing support probably based Rhodes. Following is our estimate based on establishment of operational aircraft available in **Balkans** for all purposes: 315 long-range bombers, 60 twin-engined fighters, 240 dive-bombers, 270 single-engined fighters. Last two categories would require extra tanks

if operated from north of **Corinth Canal**. Only very small attacks from points south of this owing to aerodrome shortage in Morea, but some 60/90 dive-bombers and similar number single-engined fighters could operate from Rhodes provided aerodromes in Rhodes not required for other operations. 'Estimated that both troops and shipping ample for seaborne operation, and lighters for transport of tanks also believed available, hence scale of seaborne attack dependent on extent to which enemy can evade our naval forces. Reinforcements enemy naval forces and shipping from **Italy** possible, but involve hazardous route round **Cape Matapan**, if **Corinth Canal** unusable.'

2. The Commanders-in-Chief were under no illusions as to the difficulty of meeting this scale of attack, though they questioned whether it could, in fact, be achieved with the forces the Germans, according to their information, had in the **Balkans**.

Question 6

Was the anticipated scale of attack achieved or exceeded?

Answer

1. The scale of attack which actually took place was approximately equal to that which had been foreseen. The Germans showed, however, an ability to keep it going for a longer period than was expected.

Question 7

*What were the views on the possibility of defending **Crete** of—*

- (a) *His Majesty's Government in the **United Kingdom**;*
- (b) *The **United Kingdom's** Chiefs of Staff individually;*
- (c) *General Wavell;*
- (d) *Admiral Cunningham;*
- (e) *Air-Marshal Longmore;*
- (f) *Air-Marshal Tedder;*
- (g) ***General Freyberg**?*

Answer

1. A true appreciation of the chances of defending **Crete** could only be formed in the **Middle East**. However, the great importance of the island to our position in the **Mediterranean** was clear, and there was never any question of abandoning it without a struggle. On the 29th

April the Chiefs of Staff telegraphed to the Commanders-in-Chief asking for an appreciation of the defence of **Crete** from General Weston, who was at that time commanding on the island. The Chiefs of Staff also enquired when the mobile Naval base defence organisation would arrive and how soon the defences would be installed, and requested a report on the state of troops, and of the arms possessed by those who had been evacuated from **Greece**.

2. The views expressed and the attitude of the various authorities concerned are best shown in the telegrams exchanged between the United Kingdom and the **Middle East**. These are reproduced in Annex I. ¹ His Majesty's Government in the **United Kingdom**, advised by the Chiefs of Staff, were satisfied that there was a reasonable chance of success in the light of the telegrams received.

Question 8

Did the responsible officers of the Air Force at any time call attention to the fact that they would be unable to provide air protection?

Question 9

If so, did they then call attention to the risks involved in undertaking the operations without such protection?

Question 10

*Could not and should not the aerodromes in **Crete** (two out of three of which, including **Maleme**, we ourselves apparently constructed) have been rendered unusable prior to the German invasion and after we had flown off our aeroplanes and apparently decided we would not use the landing grounds?*

Question 11

*Was it sufficiently appreciated that the bulk of the troops available for the defence of **Crete** were—*

- (a) *to some degree exhausted after the Greek campaign;*
- (b) *to some extent disorganised;*
- (c) *inadequately supplied with practically everything but rifles, i.e., transport, artillery, anti-aircraft artillery, means of*

communication, and even tools for digging;

(d) embarrassed by considerable numbers of refugees?

Answers to Questions 8, 9, 10 and 11

- 1. As explained in the answer to Question 4, the air situation was fully appreciated, both at home and in the **Middle East**. It was always realised that the defence of **Crete** would be a struggle between sea and land forces on the one hand and air and airborne forces on the other. Experience in the evacuation from **Greece**, which had been successfully carried out by the Royal Navy in face of heavy air attack, seemed to show that the fleet would be able to prevent any seaborne landing without undue loss. As it turned out the landing was prevented, though heavy losses were sustained.**
- 2. It was also thought that the army would be able to cope with an airborne landing about which ample warning had been obtained. The island was known to be very mountainous with only one good aerodrome and two**

¹ Not reproduced.

landing grounds, and it was thought that, if these latter could be held and if no seaborne expedition could land, the troops in possession of the island could not be dislodged by parachute troops alone. This expectation might well have been fulfilled but for two circumstances: First, the inevitable disorganisation resulting from the evacuation from **Greece** led to a lack of equipment for the troops in the island and to the presence of large numbers of 'useless mouths.' This situation, which was not fully realised at home, was aggravated by the sinking of ships carrying equipment and tools to the island. Secondly, **Maleme** aerodrome was lost, and this allowed the enemy to land a continuous stream of fresh troops in troop carriers.

- 3. It still seems reasonable to suppose that troops well dug in and provided with mobile reserves and adequate artillery would not have been dislodged by parachutists and dive bombers.**
- 4. As to the 'destruction' of the aerodromes, it should be realised that they were in use by our own forces right up to the day before the attack took place. This was most necessary as great efforts were being made to protect the harbours on the North coast at which equipment, transport, stores, &c., were being unloaded for the**

garrison. It was only when it was known with certainty that the attack was imminent that the remnants of the Air Force were withdrawn.

- 5. The significance of this fact will appear from consideration of what is involved in making an aerodrome unserviceable. It should be made quite clear that to 'destroy' an aerodrome is virtually impossible. All that can be done is to render it unusable for a limited period. How difficult a task this is can be shown from our own experiences in South-east England last autumn. For example, 280 bombs were dropped on Biggin Hill Aerodrome on one day, including a number of delayed-action bombs. In spite of this, the fighter squadrons continued to operate, without interruption, from the aerodrome.**
- 6. Blocking expedients with surface obstacles are generally ineffective. The maximum delay that can be imposed on the use of the aerodrome is by the production of a large number of craters over nearly all the surface. Trenching with mechanical diggers is effective but rarely possible in the field.**
- 7. The speed of production of craters depends upon the nature of the subsoil. For example, a possible landing ground at **Portland** took a Field Company, R.E., with three compressors, 10 days to crater. Gravel subsoil is exceptionally difficult to deal with, as the explosive chambers keep falling in. Water near the surface creates obvious difficulties. (A number of aerodromes in **Greece**, for example, were water-logged almost up to the date of the German attack.)**
- 8. The preparation of a large number of charges, ready in position beneath the surface of the aerodrome in anticipation of demolition, has been suggested, and the question was fully investigated in the case of Manston Aerodrome in Kent. The R.A.F., however, are quite definite that they cannot conduct operations from an aerodrome in which charges have been laid. There is not only the risk of contact detonation in a crash landing, but also the more serious one of the destruction of the whole surface due to sympathetic detonation of all the charges initiated perhaps by one bomb. The preparation of charges must, therefore, take place after we ourselves have ceased to use the aerodrome.**
- 9. To take the case of Maleme Aerodrome, which had a clay surface from which a quantity of large stones had been removed. The subsoil is believed to have been clay mixed with large stones and boulders. The only methods of immobilising the aerodrome were by trenching or by the production of craters, using camouflet equipment. Mechanical equipment for trenching was not available, and, in any**

case, is a slow process.

10. If the Field Companies on **Crete** had had their full equipment (which they had not, due to the evacuation from **Greece**), each would have had 3 Light camouflet sets and 13 Hand Earth Augurs. The number of craters which would have been required is approximately 300, not more than 30 yards apart. Working at full strength and without enemy interference, a fresh Field Company could produce these in 24–30 hours' work, provided the subsoil was not found to be more difficult than stated in paragraph 3 [sic]. At the end of this task they would be exhausted. Enemy interference would probably restrict the work to the hours of darkness, and, if this were so, the work would have taken 5 nights to complete. The dilution of the Company with unskilled labour would not materially assist.
11. The quantity of explosive required would be approximately 7½ tons of Ammonol or Gelnite with corresponding accessories, such as fuze, primers, detonators, &c.
12. It remains to consider what would be the resulting delay caused by this great work. The evidence of Biggin Hill shows how small a part of an aerodrome is required to maintain operations from it. Unless all the debris from the craters were removed from the field—a colossal task without mechanical equipment—there would be very little work required to provide a *usable* landing strip for troop-carriers. Something in the nature of 100 men working 6–10 hours with shovels could prepare a 700-yard strip on which the landing and taking off of troop-carriers could proceed.

Question 12

Was there any difference of opinion amongst the responsible officers as to the feasibility of the operation or the adequacy of the steps taken; if so, what were those differences?

Answer

1. An answer to this question could only be given by a detailed enquiry in the **Middle East**. In the **United Kingdom**, as the telegrams show, there was a keen desire that every possible step should be taken in the time available to strengthen the defences and to provide reinforcements in tanks, artillery and equipment. While no one could give a guarantee of success, there was no shadow of doubt but that the defence must be attempted.

Question 13

*What was the degree of co-operation between those responsible for the three armed Services in the **Middle East**—*

(a) before and

(b) during

*the **Crete** operations?*

Answer

1. The detailed plans made in the **Middle East** are not at present available. There is no reason to suppose, however, that there was not a full degree of co-operation between the three Commanders-in-Chief and the three Services as a whole, both before and during the operations. More light will be thrown on this matter when reports are received from the Middle East.

Question 14

*Is a system of co-operation satisfactory under which two of the three responsible officers concerned are located at **Cairo** and the third at **Alexandria**—150 miles away?*

Answer

1. It has always been recognised that the arrangement referred to is not entirely satisfactory, and from time to time there have been discussions as to how to improve matters. It goes without saying that the Commander-in-Chief, **Mediterranean**, must go to sea with his fleet and can hardly have his headquarters when ashore anywhere but at **Alexandria**. It might be proposed that Commander-in-Chief, **Middle East**, and Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, **Middle East**, should make their headquarters also at **Alexandria**, but there are a number of objections to this course. As the capital of Egypt and the seat of the Government, and the centre of communications throughout the **Middle East**, there is much to be said for the Commander-in-Chief, **Middle East**, being in **Cairo**.

2. The matter is, however, now under investigation, and it is hoped that a better arrangement will be found practicable.

Question 15

What steps are being taken to avoid a recurrence of a situation under

which well-trained and courageous troops find themselves battered to pieces from the air without means of defence or retaliation?

Answer

1. As explained in the answer to Question 4, the giving of adequate air support to the army is very largely a question of geography. The side which has its air bases nearer the scene of land operations is placed at a great advantage. The only places in the **Middle East** theatre of war in which the enemy can develop overwhelming air strength from positions more favourable than our own are in **Malta** and possibly **Cyprus**, which are dealt with in the answer to Question 17.

Question 16

*What are considered to be the net results of the **Crete** operation—*

- (a) the disadvantages to us by the loss of the Island;*
- (b) the advantages to us in losses by the enemy of men and equipment and the delay imposed upon him?*

NOTE: *This is of academic interest only, as the operation was not entered upon as a desperate adventure in order to obtain a corresponding advantage, but was apparently conceived as an ordinary operation of war with the probability of successful defence.*

Answer

- (a) Disadvantages to us by the loss of **Crete**.*

1. The loss of **Crete** deprives us of the use of **Suda Bay** as a Naval anchorage. While we held **Greece**, this anchorage was of considerable value. The loss of **Greece** meant that **Suda Bay** came within range of very heavy air attack and, in consequence, it could only have been used for short periods by a small number of ships, so that its value was in any case much reduced.
2. The next and by far the most important disadvantage of losing **Crete** was that enemy short-range fighters and dive bombers, with operational radii of action of 150 miles and 117 miles respectively, can now operate from bases in **Crete** and Western Libya against all ships sailing through the channel between **Crete** and **Libya**. Our own short-range fighters, operating from bases on the **Western**

Desert coast, have not the range to cover this channel. The enemy can therefore use his fighters to contain Fleet Air Arm fighters operating from carriers, while his bombers attack His Majesty's ships or convoys unmolested except by anti-aircraft fire. Long-range fighters have not the necessary performance to engage short-range fighters with any hope of success. The result of this situation is that sailing convoys to Malta can be made most hazardous, if not impracticable, and unless and until the enemy can be driven from the coast of Cyrenaica, the Mediterranean Fleet is virtually confined to the Eastern Mediterranean.

- 3. The same situation could not have been produced by the enemy using the southern Greece aerodromes. The distance from southern Greece to Cyrenaica is too great for the water in between to be completely covered by bombers and fighters working from the two opposite coasts. Moreover, our own fighters from Crete could have given a small degree of cover.**
- 4. Now that they are established in Crete, the Germans can work a line of communications from Athens to Benghazi which it will be extremely difficult for us to molest, except with submarines.**
- 5. Although the aerodromes in Crete are the same distance from objectives in Alexandria and the Delta as the aerodromes in Cyrenaica, they are nevertheless nearer to the German main European supply organisation, and are therefore easier to maintain. An increased effort against Egypt can therefore be exerted more easily by operating from Crete than by developing more aerodromes in Libya.**

(b) *Advantages to us in losses by the enemy of men and equipment and the delay imposed upon him.*

- 6. It is estimated that the Germans lost 250 aircraft, including 150 troop carriers, in the operations over Crete. This figure does not include aircraft which were damaged. His losses in men amounted to between 10 and 15 thousand. This figure is trifling when compared with the great numbers of the German Army, but it includes a large number of highly-trained parachute troops.**
- 7. The battle in Crete was, however, most valuable, occurring as it did just at the time when Rashid Ali had declared his hostility and matters in Iraq were trembling in the balance.**
- 8. The attack on Habbanyia started on the 30th April. The advance party of the relieving force from Palestine reached Habbanyia on the 15th May and Baghdad on the 30th, and on the latter date Rashid Ali fled and the Iraqi Government asked for an armistice. The attack on Crete began on the 20th May and lasted until the**

1st June.

9. There is no doubt that if the Germans had not been fully occupied with the battle in **Crete** during the critical ten days while the small relieving force was struggling to reach **Baghdad**, Axis forces would have been flown in increasing strength to **Iraq** and the outcome of events in that country might have been very different. As it was, they were only able to send a very few aeroplanes which could not affect the issue. Their failure to back up Rashid Ali had a notable effect throughout the whole of the **Middle East**.
10. Furthermore, if the Germans had been free to reinforce **Iraq** in considerable strength, they would at the same time have established themselves securely in Northern Syria. The defence of **Crete** was certainly not undertaken with the object of achieving these results, but nevertheless we have here another instance of stubborn action reaping unforeseen rewards.

Question 17

*What effect have the operations in **Crete** had upon the possibility of defending **Malta**, **Cyprus**, &c.?*

Answer

Cyprus.

1. The geographical situation of **Cyprus** is not so unfavourable as that of **Crete** since, if we hold **Syria** and Palestine, we can operate air forces over the island with greater facility than can the enemy from his base at Rhodes. An early attack on **Cyprus** was considered quite probable soon after the end of the battle in **Crete**, and the policy laid down by His Majesty's Government was that no serious attempt to defeat a heavy attack should be made. A small garrison was to be maintained, so that the enemy could not walk in unopposed, but in face of a serious attack this garrison was to take [to] the mountains and operate as guerillas. Preparations for this were put in hand.
2. As soon as we have completed the occupation of **Syria**, the policy for the defence of **Cyprus** will have to be reconsidered.

Malta.

3. The situation in **Malta** is, of course, very different to that of either **Crete** or **Cyprus**. **Malta** is a fortress which has been in our possession

for over 100 years and has powerful defences which are constantly being augmented. A great deal of underground accommodation is available, so that, although there have been almost incessant air raids for a year, the casualties have been trifling. There is a completely equipped and efficient garrison; the air defences consist of fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft guns, the strength of which at the end of June was—

Serviceable Hurricanes 50

Heavy Anti-aircraft guns 112

Light Anti-aircraft guns 72

It is hoped, before the end of this month, to increase the number of anti-aircraft guns to—

Heavy Anti-aircraft guns 112

Light Anti-aircraft guns 120

A good system of R.D.F. has been installed.

4. Nevertheless, the lessons of **Crete** are being thoroughly studied in **Malta**, and no stone will be left unturned to prepare the Island for heavy attack. A word of warning must, however, be sounded. The ability of any island to withstand a heavy air and seaborne attack must be limited unless air bases exist on the mainland nearby, from which additional cover can be provided, and unless a fleet can operate in the surrounding waters. At present no such air bases exist, nor could surface forces remain in the vicinity.
5. If, therefore, the Germans decide to attempt to capture **Malta**, the success of their enterprise will depend upon the amount of force they are prepared to expend on it. They could undoubtedly mount an attack from **Sicily** and Southern Italy of the same type as they launched against **Crete** from Rhodes and **Greece**. Their losses would be a good deal heavier than they sustained at **Crete**, but if they decided to maintain their attack day after day regardless of loss for perhaps a period of several weeks, they would probably in the end be successful. There is good reason to suppose, however, that the cost of this success might be the crippling of a large portion of the German short-range air force. Conversely, the losses which the Germans would sustain in the attack might be so great that they could not face them. It is this thought which may have deterred them from making the effort before now.

Question 18

Should arrangements not be made to place certain adequate Air Forces under direct Army control?

Answer

- 1. It has always been recognised that a proportion of the air forces operating in an overseas theatre of war must be under the direct control of the Army. This proportion consists of the Army Co-operation Squadrons whose primary task is reconnaissance and whose personnel are specially trained for the purpose. In addition to the Army Co-operation Squadrons, an Expeditionary Force is accompanied by an air component which contains a proportion of fighter and bomber squadrons for the immediate support of the Army. When important operations are impending, the action of the whole of the air forces in the theatre of war is closely co-ordinated by the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief with the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, so that the whole of the combined resources of the Army and the Air Force will be used to the best advantage at the time.**
- 2. Recent operations in the [Middle East](#) have shown that the machinery for co-ordinating the work of the land and air forces leaves something to be desired. The method of communication from ground to air; the training of soldiers and airmen in close co-operation; and the avoidance of the wasteful use of air power, are matters which require more attention. This attention is now being given both at home and in the [Middle East](#) and it is hoped to achieve better results in future.**
- 3. It should not be thought, however, either that the Germans employ a different system to our own or that the control of air forces in the Middle East by the Army would have led to any different results in Crete. Apart from the Army Co-operation Squadrons, which are similar to our own, the Germans employ their air force in accordance with their general strategical plan, either on independent means or in support of the Army, as the case may be. A great deal of the apparently superior results which they have achieved have been due to the enormous superiority in numbers which they have been able to employ at the decisive point and this, in turn, has been due to their central position on the Continent, which has enabled them to transfer air forces rapidly from one theatre to another. The reasons for the lack of air support at [Crete](#) have already been dealt with in the answer to Question 4.**

Question 19

Has the possibility (or probability) of a similar air-borne attack on other parts of the [Middle East](#) (including the Canal and Egypt itself) been considered and are the necessary steps being taken?

Answer

1. Except at **Malta** and **Cyprus**, which have been dealt with in the reply to Question 17, there is no part of the **Middle East** ... [where] an attack similar to that on **Crete** could be staged by the enemy. There is nowhere where he could attain the complete air superiority which would enable him to land large numbers of parachutists and air-borne troops in daylight.
2. There is, of course, the obvious possibility that, when he has built up his forces, he may attempt large-scale operations against Egypt and the Canal zone, as part of which he may attempt to drop air-borne troops, and everyone is fully alive to this possibility. If, however, he attains the complete air superiority necessary to give him freedom of action in daytime over our back areas, the situation will indeed be serious. All our efforts must, therefore, be directed to ensuring that such a state of affairs cannot occur.

Question 20

Is the vital importance of air and armoured reinforcement of the Middle East fully recognised and are the necessary steps being taken?

Answer

1. The vital importance of air and armoured reinforcement of the Middle East has always been fully recognised and the only limits placed on what is sent by every available route are:
 - a) the transport facilities available;
 - b) in the case of tanks, the maintenance of bare security in the United Kingdom. Annex II ¹ shows the present rate at which air and tank reinforcements are being despatched from the **United Kingdom** and the U.S.A.

¹ Not reproduced.

* Annex to C.O.S. (41) 405.

TO GREECE

GLOSSARY

Glossary

[The abbreviations in italics indicate German units.]

AA	anti-aircraft
AA & QMG	Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General
ADDS	Assistant Director of Dental Services
Adjt	Adjutant
ADMS	Assistant Director of Medical Services
ADOS	Assistant Director of Ordnance Services
ADS	Advanced Dressing Station
Adv Pty	Advance Party
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
amn	ammunition
Arty	Artillery
ASC	Army Service Corps
A/T	
A-Tk	anti-tank
a-tk	
A Tps	Army Troops
Bde	Brigade
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BGS	Brigadier, General Staff
BM	Brigade Major
Bn	Battalion
Br	British
BTE	British Troops in Egypt
BTG	British Troops in Greece
Bty	Battery
Cav	Cavalry
CCRA	Commander Corps Royal Artillery
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff

C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CO	Commanding Officer
Comd	Commander
COS	Chiefs of Staff
Coy	Company
CPO	Command Post Officer
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery
CRASC	Commander Royal Army Service Corps
CRE	Commander Royal Engineers
CRME	Commander Royal Mechanical Engineers
DAAG	Deputy Assistant Adjutant-General
DADOS (E)	Deputy Assistant Director of Ordnance Services (Equipment)
DAQMG	Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General
DID	Detail Issue Depot
disposns	dispositions
Div	Division(al)
Div Pet Coy	Divisional Petrol Company
Div Pro Coy	Divisional Provost Company
Div Sigs	Divisional Signals
Div Sup Coln	Divisional Supply Column
E and M Coy	Equipment and Maintenance Company
Ech	Echelon
Engrs	Engineers
Fd	Field
Fd Amb	Field Ambulance
Fd Hyg Sec	Field Hygiene Section
FDL	Forward Defended Locality
Fd Pk Coy	Field Park Company
FSD	Field Supply Depot
Gen Hosp	General Hospital
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
Gp	Group
GPO	Gun Position Officer
GSO I	General Staff Officer, 1st Grade
4H	4 Hussars

HMGs	Heavy machine guns
HMSO	His Majesty's Stationery Office
HMT	His Majesty's Transport
hows	howitzers
HQ	Headquarters
2i/c	second-in-command
incl	including; inclusive
Ind	Independent
Inf	Infantry
Int	Intelligence
IRO	International Refugee Organisation
I tanks	infantry tanks
Kilo	Kilometre
Km	
LAD	Light Aid Detachment
LCA	Landing Craft, Assault
LCM	Landing Craft, Mechanised
LCT	Landing Craft, Tank
LMG	light machine gun
LO	liaison officer
<i>Lt Arty Coln</i>	<i>Light Artillery Column</i>
<i>MC Bn</i>	<i>Motor Cycle Battalion</i>
MDS	Main Dressing Station
MG	Machine Gun
MO	Medical Officer
<i>Mot</i>	<i>Motorised</i>
MT	Mechanical Transport
<i>Mtn</i>	<i>Mountain</i>
NAAFI	Navy, Army and Air Force Institute
NCO	non-commissioned officer
N.D.	Nuremberg Documents
NZA	New Zealand Artillery
NZANS	New Zealand Army Nursing Servic
NZE	New Zealand Engineers
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
NZMC	New Zealand Medical Corps
OC	Officer Commanding

offrs	officers
OP	Observation Post
Op Instr	Operation Instruction
Ord	Ordnance
ORs	other ranks
PAD	Passive Air Defence
PAK gun	<i>Panzerabwehrkanone</i> (anti-tank gun)
P1	Platoon
2-pr	2-pounder
Pro	Provost
PW	prisoner of war
<i>Pz</i>	<i>Panzer</i>
RA	Royal Artillery
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
Rds	rounds
RE	Royal Engineers
recce	reconnaissance
Regt	Regiment
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RHQ	Regimental Headquarters
ROM	Regimental Medical Officer
Res MT	Reserve Mechanical Transport
RMT	
RNVR	Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
RTO	Railway Traffic Officer
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment
Ry C and M Gp	Railway Construction and Maintenance Group
Ry Constr Coy	Railway Construction Company
Ry Op Gp	Railway Operating Group
Sigs	Signals
sqn	squadron
Svy Tp	Survey Troop
TEWT	Tactical Exercise Without Troops
Tp	Troop

VAD

Voluntary Aid Detachment

Wkshop

Workshop

W/T

wireless telegraphy

TO GREECE

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