



## ARTHUR ERNEST SCOONES

(1917 – 2000)

20<sup>th</sup> NZ Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division

## ON THE RUN IN GREECE

An account of the escape, evasion and eventual capture and incarceration of my father Arthur Ernest Scoones and his fellow soldiers Norman Joffre McTaggart and Patrick William (Paddy) Toohill in April 1941 during the Greek Campaign against the Axis forces of Italy and Germany.

The original article was written and published by B C Borthwick on 7 August 1975 under the Title "Capture on the Island of Zante". While the facts as described by Mr Borthwick remain unaltered, some grammar and place names have been corrected to assist readers.

Also included in this account is an interview with Arthur by his Grand Daughter Anna Kirkwood as part of a 7<sup>th</sup> Form Project when she attended Riccarton High School.

Document includes extract about the Battle of Greece taken from Wikipedia.

### **Grant Scoones**

Marion, Rangitikei District

April 2015



*"They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old,  
Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn,  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We shall remember them"*

# ESCAPE, EVASION AND EVENTUAL CAPTURE ON THE ISLAND OF ZAKYNTHOS (ZANTE)

## **The Three Musketeers**

The story concerns three NZ Infantry Soldiers fighting in Greece as part of the NZ Expeditionary Force, in the early stages of WW2. Sgt Norm McTaggart worked for Woolworths in Dunedin, Private Arthur Scoones, also from Dunedin was a butcher by trade and Private Paddy Toohill was a truck driver for a Christchurch brewery. All three had volunteered to service their country, and were part of a small rear-guard echelon of British troops retreating from the advancing Nazi force in the Servia Pass area of Northern Greece.

The retreat from Servia Pass was extremely dangerous, and the British troops scattered and took cover wherever they could, and for the next two weeks, Arthur, Norm and Paddy walked southwards avoiding main roads and the ever present German forces until they reached Astakos on the western coast of the Greek Peninsula. From Astakos, they travelled by launch to the island of Ithaca and then on to the island of Zakynthos (Zante) to the south of Ithaca in the Ionian Sea on the west coast of Greece. Unfortunately for our intrepid three, their arrival in Zakynthos coincided with the occupation of the port town of Zante by Italian Paratroopers and they were captured to begin four years of imprisonment with the Italians and finally the Germans, when Italy capitulated.



Aliakmon (Haliacmon) River

## **The Battle for Servia Pass and Withdrawal to Thermopylae**

The battle of Servia Pass began in April 1941. British troops were dug into defensive positions on the south side of the Aliakmon (Haliacmon) River in a bid to resist German penetration in Greece from the north and east. The German "Blitzkrieg" in Yugoslavia had been so swift and devastating following the collapse of the Greek army in Albania, that to avoid being outflanked and overrun, it became critical that all British forces withdraw from Servia Pass to a more defensible position near Thermopylae on the east coast of Greece. On 23 April 1941 through tenacious defence, the ANZAC forces delayed the invading German forces in the area long enough to allow the evacuation of the British expeditionary force to Crete and ultimately to North Africa to fight again. This conflict became known as the "Battle of Thermopylae".

### Withdrawal from Servia Pass

The withdrawal from Servia Pass was under the command of Lt Col H K Kippenberger, Commanding Officer of the 20<sup>th</sup> NZ Battalion. With him were Lt Kelsall of the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Company Engineers and 60 Sappers with their trucks and ordnance, who were to carry out demolitions through the Servia Pass to cover the withdrawal. Also part of the force were the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion Bren Carriers under Lt Green and Sgt Sullivan, the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion Intelligence officer.



Lt Col Kippenberger with Sgt Charles Upham VC & Bar

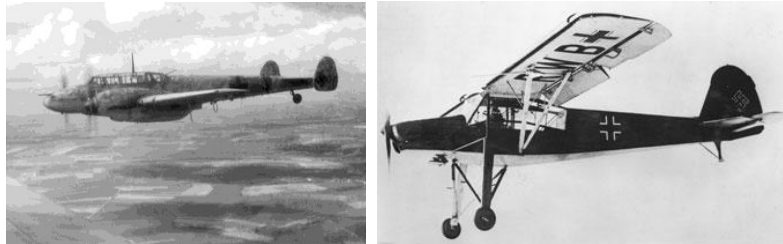
At 9pm on 17 April 1941, the rear guard party took up their post at the first demolition point in Servia Pass. The primary objective was to get three battalions of infantry (18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>) from their forward positions onto southbound trucks to join the force at Thermopylae. The Brigade Commander Brigadier Puttick wanted everyone onto trucks and evacuated south by 3am on the 18<sup>th</sup> April. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Battalions were evacuated without major problems, but the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion were forced to undertake a strenuous five hour march to the pickup point, which turned out to be a nightmare.



Servia Pass

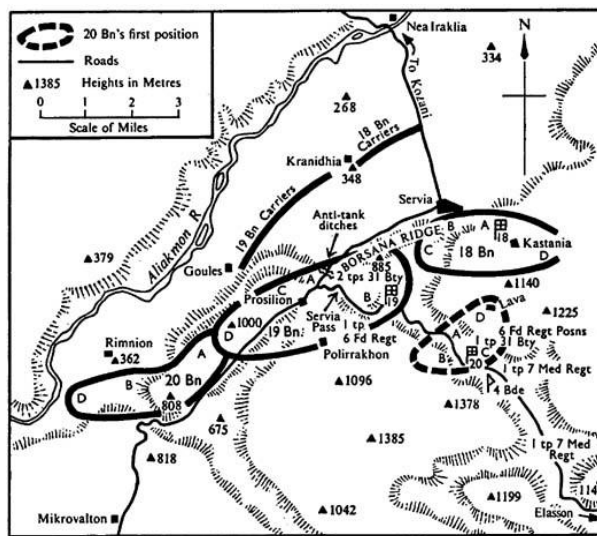
Two of the companies failed to arrive as expected, and despite putting the safe withdrawal at risk, Kippenberger decided to delay the demolition work to give the troops more time. It was after 5am before all of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion had reported to the pickup point and at 6am the demolition work began. The sappers wasted no time in blowing the charges, but it was 8am and daylight before the rear-guard party was clear of Servia Pass. Brigadier

Puttick remained with the sappers and only after confirming that all the charges had blow and that Kippenberger had left, did he head south. Eager to be on road, the rear guard party convoy formed up in ten vehicles to the mile and with Kippenbergers staff car the last vehicle in the convoy, the order was full speed ahead and no stopping, even if attacked by the Luftwaffe.



ME110 Fighter Bomber (r) and "Betsy" Surveillance aircraft of the Luftwaffe

It was now broad daylight and after a mile or two on the road, the column was spotted by "Betsy" a German reconnaissance aircraft and within minutes, the column was attacked by ME110s with bombs, machine guns and cannons. Under this intense attack, the convoy ground to a halt and the troops dived for cover.



Servia Pass

The carrier driven by Cpl Lawrence came under heavy fire and he and his driver, Alan Sharp, jumped off, followed by Sgt Sullivan, the Intelligence Officer, who had joined them shortly before as a passenger when the motorcycle he had ridden through Servia Pass, had finally broke down. Sullivan jumped into a ditch, while Sharp and Lawrence ran for cover on higher ground. Sullivan did not see Sharp and Lawrence again. Initially Sullivan thought that they were being strafed by the Luftwaffe, but he quickly realized that the carrier was under attack from two German tanks, which were now clearly visible. As it transpired, while the leading truck in the convoy had passed through the area before the tanks reached the road, the rest of the vehicles were now in a trap. Sgt Sullivan decided to run back and warn Kippenberger and the other two carriers at the rear of the echelon but his boots became stuck in the heavy mud and by the time he had reached Kippenberger's car there was nobody there, although there were carrier tracks close by indicating that the CO had been picked up.

With the arrival of a third German tank and lorry loads of German infantry, Kippenberger realized that his rear-guard party were heavily outnumbered and rather than stand and fight and be annihilated, the sensible action was to take cover. In the meantime, Lt Green had sensed the situation was desperate and he took Kippenberger and his driver Freddie Ross on board and signaling Cpl Frank Ross in the third bren carrier to follow, headed for cover in scrub and bush further away from the advancing Germans. To get to the safer ground, the carriers had to cross some ploughed and muddy fields, which clogged the carrier tracks making them impossible to steer and eventually stalling their progress completely so that they became a sitting target for the advancing Panzers. The crews bailed out of the carriers and dived for cover over a bank to a safer position for the moment. Now out of the line of fire from ground troops and tanks, but still under aerial surveillance from "Betsy", the isolated and vulnerable groups of soldiers began to consider other options for escape.

It was became apparent to the men that they were no longer part of an aggressive and disciplined fighting force but were being outgunned and outnumbered by a significant enemy force. They were now on the run and their survival was dependent entirely on their own initiative and resourcefulness if they wished to escape from the advancing Nazi military machine.



Ellassona

After a time, "Betsy" left the area and the men in Cpl Ross's carrier took stock. The group comprised Ross, his gunner Arthur Scoones, his driver Paddy Toohill, Sgt McTaggart, whose own carrier had been disabled in the pass and another unnamed passenger who had joined the group in the retreat. They had their rifles, two bren guns and some ammunition, but no food, personal kit or blankets. With a NZ rear-guard holding the road further south at Ellassona, they knew they had to flank the Germans and try and catch up with the main Allied force before it pulled out from the town, and they realised they had to get a move on.

After two hours travelling south they group caught up with seven other soldiers who were also on the run and they joined forces. On reaching a ridge they looked at the depressing sight of a plain covered with German tanks, which would require a much longer route to bypass them, further limiting their chances of catching up with the main force. Progress was slow and with night coming, they realized that they had eaten nothing that day. They were able to obtain some bread and a few eggs from a small village, but with Germans close by, the villagers were understandably nervous about the Kiwis presence and did not permit them to sleep in the

vicinity of the village. They pushed on and then spent a bitterly cold night in the shelter of some bushes, getting up every half hour or so to stretch their legs and restore circulation.



Servia, Ellassona and Larissa

Next morning, they followed a river flowing south and in the afternoon after crossing 3-4 miles of swampy ground, they were able to see dust rising in the distance. They assumed it must be the road to Larissa, but whose vehicles were they? Were they Allied artillery withdrawing from Ellassona or had they already left and were the dust clouds German vehicles advancing to Larissa?



German invasion of Larissa 1941

Spurred on by the hope that the vehicles might be allied artillery on the move, the men waded through creeks, mud and slime until they were close enough to identify the vehicles on the road as German! Footsore, wet, exhausted and very hungry, the Kiwis had a good swear and then began to review their options.

They decided that the group was too big for easy movement so they divided up with McTaggart, Ross, Scoones, Toohill, Poole and Gascoyne remaining together. They knew that there was a network of tracks through the hills and mountains of Greece known as the “Secret Streets” and with the Germans advancing south in strength on the roads, there was little point in trying to get to Larissa that way, as the allied force was unlikely to be there when they arrived. So, they decided to travel via the hill tracks and avoid the main roads.

The fugitives found the hill country people very generous and supportive and for a week they did well for food, mainly goats milk cheese, bread and eggs. In one valley there were quite a few milking cows and they quenched

their thirst and hunger with fresh, warm milk on a number of occasions. With hunger kept at bay, their main worry now became their feet. With constantly wet socks and boots, their feet were never dry and the torment of walking on painful feet was a daily reality. Despite this, they knew they had to keep moving to stay ahead of the Germans.

They had a bit of good luck over this time when they met with some English speaking Greeks who persuaded them to ditch their rifles and uniforms and dressed them in a selection of Greek civilian clothing. They were an odd looking bunch in their new clothes, each wearing a cap, and Ross, the tallest of the group a good quality coat. McTaggart and Scoones had knickerbockers trousers and McTaggart a long green overcoat with brass buttons. Toohill was kitted out in a skin tight summer outfit that was a bit ragged and certainly not suitable for the time of year (early Spring). The boys had a good laugh at themselves over the new clothing and Frank Ross offered a fiver to anyone who could get a photo of them together.

The best friend of an infantry soldier is his rifle and it is the last thing he will part with but the men realized that they were no longer a viable combatant force and if there had been an opportunity to dispose of a few Germans, the likely outcome would be severe repercussions for the Greeks who had so willingly helped them. To get safely through the German occupied territory, they were dependent on the ongoing help of the local population and to put the lives of these generous people in jeopardy was unthinkable. Accordingly, they ditched their rifles, uniforms and tin hats and continued their travels as scruffy, unshaven Greek peasants in army boots. The boots might give them away to an alert Gerry, but good footwear was essential to them and it was thus a risk worth taking. To their surprise, the transformation to civilian mode proved a boost to their morale and they set off in pairs in high spirits as if they were going on a picnic outing, each pair keeping the pair in front in sight at all times.

Previously, someone had produced a tin of coffee and milk and they heated water over a fire in a cave in a tin hat and made the oddest tasting coffee any of them had experienced. The sweat and paint off the hat produced a taste all of its own, but it was hot and they were very glad of the drink. They had been drinking water any time and on any occasion they found it and seemed to suffer no ill effects as a result. In swampy areas mosquitoes were a nuisance and they trusted their luck that they mozzies were not of the malaria spreading species.

### **Meeting the Enemy**

Walking along a quiet road, they suddenly came face to face with a column of German trucks and half tracks. They had no choice but to bluff it out, and fortunately nobody stopped or questioned them. This experience gave them more confidence in their civilian disguise and it was a great relief to them not to have to dive for cover to avoid German aerial surveillance or troops, as nobody took any notice of them. They were helped in this regard by the presence of unarmed Greek soldiers returning to their villages and apart from some of these poor souls being grabbed for work parties, they too were ignored.

They passed through a small town that was full of German troops and at that stage felt that they would be safer and more comfortable in a village now visible on a hill above them. It proved to be further away than the thought however and when they reached the outskirts of the village they were so tired that they took shelter in an animal shelter and tried to catch some sleep. There appeared to be no Germans around so after a rest, three

of the men decided to go into the village to try and get some food. Sometime later, only two returned with some bread and cheese, but the third, Poole, had gone missing.

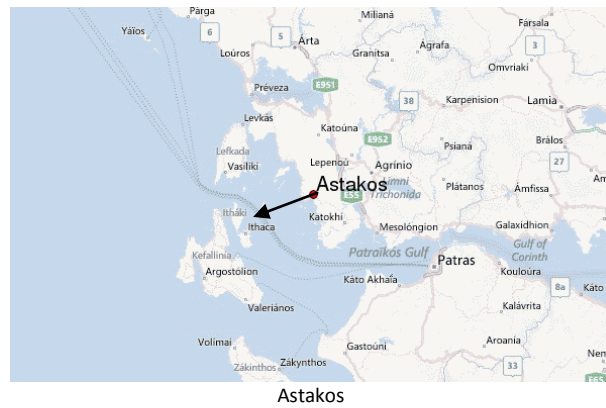
### **Ross, Gascoyne and Poole**

Ross and Gascoyne decided to return to the village to see what had happened to Poole and found him in a tavern tucking into a bowl of bread and hot milk. Ross and Gascoyne joined Poole for a bite to eat and immediately felt a lot better. A Greek policeman they met offered the three men a bed in the police station, which the three men accepted. They dosed down on the floor with a blanket, but before they could get to sleep, the sergeant in charge of the police station turned up and refused to let them stay, leading them down the road to the other side of the village where he showed them a track and indicated that they should follow it. The men set off along the track but were so tired, that within 100 yards they decided to take cover in a vineyard and catch some sleep. It was a frosty night, and they became bitterly cold.

At daybreak, the three men returned to the animal shelter where they had left McTaggart, Scoones, Toohill and Len Madden (an Australian serving with the 18<sup>th</sup> NZ Battalion), but there was no sign of their comrades and they were at a loss as to where the others had gone. They knew McTaggart and Toohill had extremely painful feet and were very tired and could not be too far away, but they had no idea where to start their search. The three then returned to the tavern and after a feed of bread and hot milk, two Greeks took them to the same track that the police sergeant had taken them to the previous night and indicated they should follow it. They had gone less than 50 yards beyond the point in the vineyard where they had slept the night before, when Ross found Paddy Toohill's army pay book lying on the side of the track by a small stream. Realising that their other men could not be too far ahead, Ross, Poole and Gascoyne sped up to try and catch up with the others. Unfortunately, they had not gone far when the track forked in several directions and after walking on a different track, they realized it was the wrong one and disappointed and weary, they continued on their way, and out of this story.

### **McTaggart, Scoones, Toohill and Madden**

After Ross and Gascoyne had left the animal shelter to search for Poole the previous night, McTaggart, Toohill, Scoones and Madden had eaten the bread and cheese and then gone to sleep in the straw. During the night, they were woken by the Greek police and taken through the village to a track, which the police indicated they should follow. They had no idea what had happened to the other three men and were too tired to search for them so at dawn they pressed on along the track, choosing alternative tracks as they went that appeared to provide easier going. By afternoon, it was clear they were coming out of the hill country and eventually they came to the town of Agrinio, which was under German occupation. By now they had become confident with their civilian disguise and passed through the town without being stopped or questioned by the Germans. The tracks they followed then took them due west to the port of Astakos, on the west coast of the Greek mainland and close to the island of Ithaca. By this time McTaggart's feet had deteriorated to the point that they were extremely painful and bleeding, so he finished the journey on a donkey, giving him a sore backside for his troubles in addition to his dodgy feet.



With the help of the Astakos police, they met the Manager of the Bank of Athens who spoke fluent English. This generous man gave them a suit each, 500 cigarettes, 20 Drachmas, a bottle of Cognac and some drinking water and at great risk to himself, took them to a hiding place where they could wait until he arranged for a boat to get them off the mainland. When darkness fell, the bank manager returned and then took them to a jetty where they boarded a small launch laden with flour bound for the island of Ithaca.

After a short voyage, they landed on Ithaca where they met Tony Callinoss, an English speaking Greek who had shipping connections in Cardiff. Tony provide them with more Greek currency and another boat to take them to the port town of Zante, on the Island of Zakynthos to the south of Ithaca.

#### **Voyage to the Island of Zante**

Zakynthos is the southern most of the Ionian Islands, an archipelago stretching over 170 miles from Corfu in the north to Zante, lying just off Peloponnesse in the south. Tony Callinonn was keen for the four fugitives to get to Zante as quickly as possible as he was aware that a number of British expats on the island were trying to escape to Crete or Malta and transport possibilities for the four men were better.

The boat voyage from Ithaca to Zante was a nightmare for the four Kiwis. It was a pitch black night, the seas were very choppy and these conditions combined with a foul smell from the boat's bilges made all four extremely seasick. After enduring several hours of what could only be described as ghastly conditions, they were eventually landed at a rocky beach on Zakynthos and a local took them to the Zante police station. There they were given a friendly welcome by the Greek police who provided a meal for them. They were still suffering from sea sickness but accepted the meal and felt much better after eating. Later, the police took them to a hiding place in an old lookout on a hill overlooking Zante, where they were able to rest.

About 9am the same morning, there was an unexpected and unwelcome surprise for Zante, when three Italian flying boats landed on the harbor and offloaded well armed troops from an Italian paratroop regiment, who immediately occupied the town, commandeered all the boats without opposition from any Greek forces, who had long since disbanded.



Italian Paratroopers occupying Zante in 1941

Our four fugitives watched the invasion from their lookout on the hill with some trepidation and began to wonder if they had landed from the frying pan into the fire. After discussing the situation, two of the party walked down to the police station to try and find out what was going on, but were immediately detained at the station by the Greek police while other police officers were sent back up the hill to bring down the other two men. They were given a meal of boiled eggs washed down with cognac at the station and put into an unlocked cell. Over this time, the police had become very jittery and not too long afterwards, there was a lot of shouting and the police station was surrounded by excited Italian troops. The four “prisoners” were brought out from the unlocked cell to find three Breda machine guns trained on them, hardly a pleasant situation for an allied soldier dressed in civilian clothes.... With some justification, the Italians could consider them spies or saboteurs, and there was a distinct risk that summary execution could follow. Fortunately for our boys (and their descendents), there was an English speaking Italian officer who had lived in America before the war and he at once began to interrogate them about who they were, why they were there and where they had come from.

The biggest issue faced by the four soldiers was how to confirm their own identity when the only form of i/d they possessed was Arthur’s army pay book. Arthur attempted to explain who they were, and how they had got to Zante, but the questioning continued, particularly about the lack of uniform, why they were wearing civvies and why they were in Greek clothing but unable to speak Greek.

They situation was becoming increasingly dangerous and more tense but was eventually relived when they explained to the officer that they were in Greek clothing because they had been unable to move in British uniforms without being shot at by the Luftwaffe. This explanation seemed to amuse the Italian officer, who translated to the other Italian soldiers who immediately burst out laughing. The laughter eased the tension and the four men breathed a sigh of relief when the muzzles of the machine guns were lowered. They had been facing an uncertain and possibly dire fate, but the English speaking Italian officer had saved the day for them and they were grateful to him. He was obviously a good man, because later when they had been incarcerated in an Italian POW camp, they received a parcel of books from the officer.

The four were then escorted from the police station to an Italian patrol boat in the harbor by a heavily armed escort, where they were well treated by a friendly and hospitable crew. An Italian gave them all a haircut and shave and they were able to have a good wash and clean up. There seemed no end to the generosity of the Italian sailors and the four (now) prisoners

were plied with alcohol and travelled as tourists rather than captives, being given a free run of the patrol boat.

The patrol craft took the four prisoners from Zante to Argostolion on the island of Kephallonia, where they were off loaded and spend four miserable days in a civil prison (*Cephalonia or Kephallonia was the setting for **Captain Corelli's Mandolin** is a 2001 epic war film directed by John Madden and based on Louis de Bernières' 1994 novel of the same name. It stars Nicolas Cage and Penélope Cruz. The film is dedicated to the thousands of Italian soldiers executed by German forces on Cephallonia in September 1943 and to the people of Cephallonia who were killed in the post-war earthquake).*



Argostolion

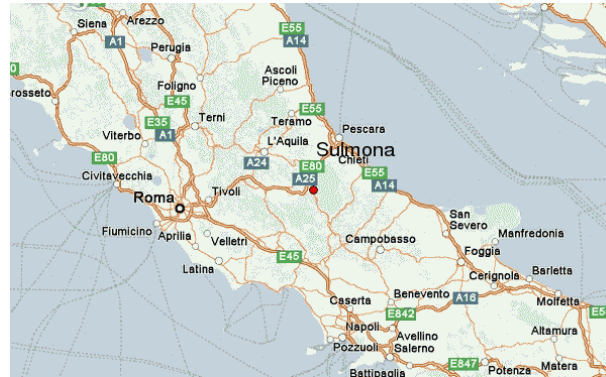
The men were unhappy about being classed as convicts, but were unable to attract POW status at that time as they had been captured out of uniform and their status was as yet uncertain. After four days in the cells, they were relieved to be taken to the harbor where they boarded another patrol craft and headed north through along the west coast of Greece until eventually they were offloaded to an Italian Army vessel from Valona (Vlore) in Albania. As they disembarked from the Navy patrol boat, the crew stood to attention as a mark of respect, which did not go down to well with an Italian Major on the Army boat. They now found themselves in the custody of Mussolini's Black Shirts (equivalent to the Nazi SS) and were placed in a camp for Greek and Yugoslav prisoners, who were dressed in a wide variety of uniforms. And what a poor place it was....



Valona (Vlore) Albania

Four men to a tent made from Italian ground sheets buttoned together and infested with mosquitoes and bed bugs. Great! They also appeared to be the only English speaking prisoners and on a meager diet of soup and a few biscuits, were expected to work shifting drums and carting stones. Three days of this was more than enough for the boys and fortunately, they were

then moved to another Italian navy vessel bound for places unknown. The boy's main hope at that stage was that they did not run into any Royal Naval ships as their chances of survival in a sea battle did not rate very high. Fortunately, such a scenario did not eventuate and a day or so later, without incident, they disembarked at Brindisi, on the Italian mainland where they were taken by train to Sulmona in central Italy, the main camp of British POWs at that time.



Sulmona, Italia

Prior to their arrival at Sulmona, they had not met any other British prisoners and were overjoyed to join 400 Australians, most of whom had been captured in North Africa in the retreat from Benghazi to Tobruk. Among their new comrades was "Sox Symons", Bert Ferrall, Bill Bickerstaff, Reg Chippendall, Ron Warren, Pluto Miles, Mattie Higgins, Bennie Elliott and others who would become household names in the European POW camp. It was a relief to be able to talk to others in their own language again.

Very soon, along with the Australians, they were shifted by train to Bolzano in the Brenner Pass, where they were housed in an old brewery on a hillside, where, if you didn't mind the cold, you could sit outside and watch train loads of German war material pouring into Italy and ultimately bound for the North African front, while train loads of Italian vegetables were back loaded into Germany.



Bolzano

At Bolzano, Arthur had his one and only experience of Italian hospitals, when he was admitted with tonsillitis. None of the doctors spoke English, and Arthur couldn't understand what was being said, except that he had to open his mouth as wide as possible. At that point, a doctor heated an instrument over a gas burner and thrust it down Arthur's throat, burning the end of his tonsils. A bit of shock to the system, but after a couple of weeks with a sore throat (and according to dad a diet of warm soup), his tonsillitis was cured.

### **Campo #57**

Campo Concentramento Frigionieri de Guerra #57 (#57 POW Camp) was a brand new camp for British prisoners under construction at Gruppignano, 40 miles from Trieste, and the men from Bolzano became its first occupants. When the New Zealanders captured at Sidi Rezegh and other Libyan battles of November/December 1941 began to arrive, Arthur, Norm, and Paddy were able to catch up with what had happened to their platoon mates in Greece, Crete and the Western Desert campaign.



Campo 57

In September 1943, Italy capitulated and most of the British prisoners in Italian POW camps were seized by the Germans and taken by train to Germany, where they remained as prisoners until VE day in May 1945, by which time Norm, Arthur and Paddy had completed a total of four years of imprisonment in both Italy and Germany. Once freed, they were transported back to the UK and in due course repatriated to New Zealand.

In 1975, at the time Mr Borthwick wrote this account, Norm and Paddy were living in retirement in Christchurch and Arthur (my dad) had his own butchery business in Dunedin. None had seen Paddy Toohill after they parted in Germany in 1943.

This story of Norm, Arthur and Paddy would not be complete without acknowledging the Greek people not only for the assistance they provided the three men, but also for the many other Allied servicemen who were assisted with evading capture on Axis occupied Greek territory.

From Servia Pass to Astakos it is approximately 130 miles as the crow flies but the likely distance walked by the fugitives in this account was likely to be closer to 200 miles. In their weakened state, the men could never have walked this distance without the help and generosity of the Greek hill people. Their own country was being invaded by Germans and Italians and they had little to look forward to but misery and oppression but the Greek people disregarded the risk to their lives and continued to assist the escaping allied soldiers.

Norman, Arthur and Paddy made a bold bid for freedom, as did many allied soldiers, but their luck ran out at Zante with the arrival of the Italian paratroopers. Had they reached Zante a day earlier, they may well have made it south to Crete as Frank Ross and his two companions did, rather than spending four years incarcerated as prisoners of war. Timing it seems, is everything! Their worst moment was when they stood facing the three machine guns outside of the Zante police station, when they each believed they would be shot.

The Greek people believed the march from Servia Pass to Zante to be the "walk of liberty", and were generous with assistance and encouragement to the British soldiers, but at the same time, in the experience of Norman, Arthur and Paddy, the Italian Navy and other military forces were unlike the Germans, most times humane and empathetic and all three men were grateful for the small acts of kindness that made their trek and ultimate imprisonment more palatable.

# INTERVIEW WITH ARTHUR SCOONES

conducted in two parts by Arthur's Grand Daughter Anna Kirkwood  
for a 7<sup>th</sup> Form Assignment while attending Riccarton High School

## First Interview

- Anna: Where did your family originally come from?
- Arthur: My mother Emma Harris was from England and my father Arthur Edward Scoones was born in New Zealand.
- Anna: How did your parents meet?
- Arthur: My dad was a NZ soldier in WW1 and met my mother when he was recuperating in hospital in the UK after being wounded in France.
- Anna: What occupations were your parents?
- Arthur: Dad was a labourer and mum was a housemaid.
- Anna: Did you have any siblings?
- Arthur: My sisters were Dorothy and Joan and my brothers George, Stewart and Bill. I was the oldest.
- Anna: Where were you born:
- Arthur: In the UK where I lived for two years before returning to New Zealand with Mum and Dad. We sailed to NZ on the ship Aurora.
- Anna: What schools did you attend?
- Arthur: North East Valley Primary and Kin Edward Technical College.
- Anna: What age were you when you finished school?
- Arthur: I was 13
- Anna: Did you do any training when you left school?
- Arthur: Yes, I did a carpentry course for six months.
- Anna: When did you meet your wife?
- Arthur: In 1939
- Anna: Were you conscripted into the Army or did you enlist?
- Arthur: I volunteered to go to war.
- Anna: Were you trained before leaving NZ?
- Arthur: Yes, as an infantry soldier in the 20<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Battalion.

Anna: What year did you leave New Zealand?

Arthur: 1940 on the troop carrier Dominion Monarch

Anna: Did you stop anywhere on the way and how long did the voyage take?

Arthur: Yes. Sydney, Perth, Colombo (Sri Lanka) and Port Said (Egypt) and the voyage took about two months.

Anna: Who was your closest friend in the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion?

Arthur: I didn't have any close friends at that point and when we got to Egypt we all headed off to different battalions so it was a case of meeting new people all the time.

Anna: How did you end up becoming a prisoner of war?

Arthur: We were fighting in Greece and when our battalion withdrew, we were cut off from our unit and escaped into the mountains for 2-3 months. Eventually we were taken prisoner on the Island of Zykanthos and from there we were taken to Albania. After a couple of weeks in Albania, the Italians shipped us to Brindisi in Italy and then on to Sulmona Camp, also in Italy. From Sulmona we were moved to Bolzano close to the Brenner pass and then finally Campo 57, Gruppignano, northern Italy where we remained for two and a half years before being taken to a work camp. After three months at the work camp, the Italians capitulated and the Germans took over our camp. We were then moved through the Brenner Pass to Munich, Germany to a POW Camp called Stalag 8, which was a work camp in the Black Forest. From there it was to a steel works in Allendorf for a year and then the war in Europe ended. We were eventually released by the Americans and I was flown to England.

Anna: Were you treated well as a POW?

Arthur: It varied, but had it not been for the Red Cross, it is unlikely I would be sitting here with you today.

Anna: How long were you in combat?

Arthur: About six weeks.

Anna: Did you do much fighting?

Arthur: Not a lot. Much of my time was spent trying to evade the Germans and get out of Greece to join the Allied forces in Crete.

Anna: When did you return to New Zealand?

Arthur: July 1945

Anna: Have you kept in touch with the people you met during the war years?

Arthur: Yes. I have many friends throughout the country in the Prisoner of War Association and we get together at reunions from time to time.

### **Second Interview**

Anna: Could we talk some more about you being captured and becoming a POW?

Arthur: Well, we got cut off from our unit just south west of Katerini in Greece in the Servia Pass region and made our way across to the west coast of Greece through the mountains. We were helped by the Greek police who gave us a letter of introduction to show to the people in each village we passed through. As we wore civilian clothes it wasn't obvious that we were Allied soldiers. We arrived at Astakos on the west coast of Greece and then travelled by launch to Ithaca and then on to the island of Zakynthos. Unfortunately for us, we arrived at the island at the same time as a unit of Italian Paratroopers. We showed the local police the letter of introduction and explained that we wanted to catch a launch to Crete.

Anna: Was that to catch up with the rest of the Allied troops?

Arthur: Yes. To rejoin the NZ Expeditionary Force. We were unaware that while we remained at the police station, the Greek police had given our letter to the Italian Paratroopers and not too long after, we were taken into custody to become prisoners of war.

Anna: So why did the Greeks help you at first?

Arthur: Well, they supported what we were trying to do in defending Greece against the Germans and Italians, both of whom were enemies of Greece.

Anna: What happened after you were captured?

Arthur: We remained in Zante for a night and the Italians then took us by sea to Cephalonia, where there was a civilian prison. We were detained in the prison for 4-5 days and then moved to Albania for a week and then shipped by Italian Destroyer to Brindisi in Italy. After that, we were taken to the first POW camp at a place called Sulmona, where British prisoners were being detained. While at Sulmona, we caught up with 400 Australian troops who had been taken prisoner in the North African desert. We spend three weeks at Sulmona and were then moved to an old brewery in a town called Bolzano close to the Brenner Pass on the border of Italy and Germany,

where we lived for six weeks. There were not too many prisoners in Italy back then, as most of them had been taken from Greece to Germany. While at Bolzano I developed a bad case of tonsillitis. The doctors told me to take my teeth out (Dad had dentures from an early age) and they then burned my tonsils out. I recuperated in the Catholic hospital for 18 days and was well treated by the nurses and other medical staff. When I came out of hospital we were shifted to Campo 57 in Guerra where I remained for two and a half years. Food was running very low at that time and if it had not been for the Red Cross food parcels we would probably have starved. I received parcels from home, including clothing and I was fortunate to have a couple of Aunties in the UK who sent me cakes of chocolate, which I was able to trade for potatoes etc. During this time, I was moved to Camp 107 in the alps to work on the construction of a Dam and we were there until Italy capitulated in 1943. Our Italian guards told us we were now free men and 3,000 of us travelled to a town called Trafesea, where we understood the British troops would meet us. We had been there three days when a convoy of Germans in tanks arrived and took us into custody – Prisoners again... We were then put in railway trucks, 40 per truck, and moved by rail through the Brenner Pass to Munich, Germany. After that we were taken to the Brunswick Steel Works in Aldersime where we were formed into work parties, filling bomb craters and repairing buildings. I was in a work party in the forest when the Allies invaded France on D Day and lost a lot of weight. As the Americans advanced across Europe we were moved deeper into Germany but after only three days march, the Americans caught us up and we were freed. We were then flown to England by DC3 and while my weight was down to six stone at the time, apart from constant hunger, my only health scare had been the tonsillitis. I spend three months recuperating in the UK before being repatriated to New Zealand.

Anna: Was there any form of entertainment in the POW camps?

Arthur: Yes. We had concert parties and played cricket, baseball, volleyball etc. Lack of food was our main problem and when this was in very short supply, we had no energy to play sport.

Anna: So, was there enough water?

Arthur: Yes, water was plentiful. We had a shower at least once a week in the larger camps. In the German work camps we had plenty of showers, always cold.

Anna: How were the camps set up?

Arthur: There were 90 men per hut, with four bunks down one side and two down the other, 12 huts per compound.

Anna: What sort of security did the camps have?

Arthur: We were kept inside barbed wire fences and every 50 yards or so there would be guards in towers with machine guns.

Anna: Did many prisoners try and escape?

Arthur: Yes, but they were mostly recaptured. There were fewer guards in the working camps and if you took off and were recaptured you spent 30 days in solitary confinement.

Anna: What was solitary confinement?

Arthur: You were placed in a room by yourself. I did one stretch when I was caught helping dig and escape tunnel. Some prisoners became very depressed when they received bad news from home (mainly "Dear John" letters) and just walked into the wire.

Anna: How did the guards treat you?

Arthur: Oh they weren't too bad. The worst time was roll call, which was sometimes twice a day. The Germans didn't bother too much about roll calls and just did a head count when we came back from a working party. Some prisoners didn't have guards at all because they were working on farms and just lived with the German farming families. Not all of us were that lucky though as some were sent to the mines. A typical day on a work party was to be got up at 4am, walk to the station around 5am and arrive at our worksite in the forest about 6am. We didn't return to the camp until around 8pm each night, by which time the American Bombers were passing overhead.

Anna: Could you send letters home and how long did the mail take?

Arthur: Yes, we were allowed one letter per month in the established camps.

Anna: How did you feel when you were captured?

Arthur: Pretty bad on both occasions. The worst was after the Italians had released us and we were captured by the Germans while waiting for the British forces. Prior to the arrival of the Germans we could have taken to the hills and gone anywhere and to be recaptured without taking that opportunity was a great disappointment to us all.

Anna: Did you ever give up hope that you would get home to New Zealand?

Arthur: When I was first captured, our spirits were very low and defeats like Pearl Harbour and the Japanese in the Far East certainly didn't help. For a time there did not seem to be any positive news to cheer us up.

Anna: When did you arrive back in New Zealand?

Arthur: July 1945

Anna: How did you travel back to New Zealand?

Arthur: On a ship called the Arundle Castle and we left from Liverpool.

Anna: Who did you see first when you got back to New Zealand?

Arthur: My wife to be Joyce and my parents.

Anna: Were you encouraged to talk about your experiences as a POW?

Arthur: Not until your mum Stephanie asked me to speak at Linwood College.

Anna: So for years you said nothing about being a POW?

Arthur: Yes.

Anna: Did you have a job when you got home?

Arthur: Yes, I went back to the butchers shop in Dunedin where I was learning my trade before the war.

Anna: What year did you get married?

Arthur: 26 August 1945. Joyce and I had got engaged before I went to war.

Anna: Was there any rehabilitation scheme for returning soldiers?

Arthur: We were able to borrow for housing and furniture.

Anna: Was there any counseling services provided for you?

Arthur: Ah no, they didn't go in for counseling in those days.

Anna: Were there any bad aftereffects from being a POW?

Arthur: I must have had the occasional bad dream but no, I can't recall there being any lasting ill effects.

Anna: So, over the years since the war you didn't talk openly about your experiences.

Arthur: No really.

Anna: Thank you for letting me interview you Grandad...

Arthur: You're welcome Anna.

**INTERVIEW ENDS...**



*"They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old,  
Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn,  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We shall remember them"*

# THE BATTLE OF GREECE

## Extract from Wikipedia

The **Battle of Greece** (also known as **Operation Marita**, German: Unternehmen Marita) is the common name for the invasion of Greece by Germany and Italy in April 1941. It is concomitant to the stalled Italian invasion known as the Greco-Italian War. It is usually distinguished from the Battle of Crete, which came after mainland Greece had been subdued. These operations were part of the greater Balkan Campaign of Germany in World War II.

At the time of the German invasion, Greece was at war with Italy, following the Italian invasion on 28 October 1940. The Greeks defeated the initial attack and the counter-attack of March 1941. When Operation Marita began on 6 April, the bulk of the Greek army was on the Albanian border, from which the Italians were trying to enter Greece. German troops invaded through Bulgaria, creating a second front. Greece had already received a small though inadequate reinforcement from British Empire forces, in anticipation of the German attack but no more help was sent after the invasion began. The Greek army found itself outnumbered in its effort to defend against both Italian and German troops. As a result, the Bulgarian defensive line did not receive adequate troop reinforcements and was quickly overrun by the Germans, who then outflanked the Greek forces in the Albanian borders, forcing their surrender. The British Empire forces were overwhelmed and forced to retreat with an ultimate goal of evacuation. For several days Allied troops played an important part in containing the German advance on the Thermopylae position, allowing ships to be prepared to evacuate the units defending Greece.<sup>[17]</sup> The German army reached the city of Athens on 27 April and Greece's southern shore on 30 April, capturing 7,000 British Empire forces and ending the battle with a decisive victory. The conquest of Greece was completed with the capture of Crete a month later. Following its fall, Greece was occupied by military forces of Germany, Italy and Bulgaria.

Hitler later blamed the failure of his invasion of the Soviet Union, which had to be delayed, on Mussolini's failed conquest of Greece. This explanation for Germany's calamitous defeat by the Soviet Union has been refuted by the majority of historians, who have accused Hitler of trying to deflect blame for his country's defeat from himself to his ally, Italy. It nevertheless had serious consequences for the Axis war effort in the North African theatre. Von Rintelen emphasizes, from the German point of view, the strategic mistake of not taking Malta.

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## Background

### Greco-Italian War

At the outbreak of World War II, Ioannis Metaxas — the fascist-style dictator of Greece and former general — sought to maintain a position of neutrality. However, Greece was subject to increasing pressure from Italy, culminating when the Italian submarine *Delfino* sank the cruiser *Elli* on 15 August 1940. Italian leader Benito Mussolini was irritated that Nazi leader Adolf Hitler had not consulted him on his war policy and wished to establish his independence. He hoped to match the Germans' military success by taking Greece, which he regarded as an easy opponent. On 15 October 1940, Mussolini and his closest advisers finalised their decision. In the early hours of 28 October, Italian Ambassador Emanuele Grazzi presented Metaxas with a three-hour ultimatum, demanding free passage for troops to occupy unspecified "strategic sites" within Greek territory. Metaxas rejected the ultimatum (the refusal is commemorated as Greek national holiday Ohi Day), but even before its expiration, Italian troops had invaded Greece through Albania. The principal Italian thrust was directed toward Epirus. The first conflict with the Greek army was at the Battle of Elaia–Kalamas, where they failed to break the defensive line and were forced to

halt Within three weeks, the Greek army launched a successful counter-offensive, during which it marched into Albanian territory, capturing significant cities such as Korytsa and Agioi Saranta. Neither a change in Italian command nor the arrival of substantial reinforcements improved the position of the Italian army. On 13 February, General Papagos, the Commander-in-Chief of the Greek army, opened a new offensive, aiming to take Tepelenë and the port of Vlorë with British air support, but the Greek divisions encountered stiff resistance, stalling the offensive that practically destroyed the Cretan 5th Division.

After weeks of inconclusive winter warfare, the Italians launched a large-scale counter-offensive across the centre of the front on 9 March 1941, which failed, despite the Italians' superior forces. After one week and 12,000 casualties, Mussolini called off the counter-offensive and left Albania twelve days later. On 21 March, the Regia Aeronautica scored some success, when thirty Macchi C.200 Saetta fighters attacked and destroyed all the RAF Vickers Wellington medium bombers parked at Paramythia, near the Albanian border in Northern Greece. On 23 March the Greek submarine RHN Triton under Lieutenant-Commander George Zeppos, carried out a successful mission, sinking the Italian troopship Carnia off the Albanian coast. On 4 April, a formation of Italian Stukas under Captain Mario Larker from 239a Squadriglia penetrated Greek airspace and sank the Greek destroyer RHN Proussa in Dafnili Bay.

Modern analysts believe that the Italian campaign failed because Mussolini and his generals initially allocated insufficient resources to the campaign (an expeditionary force of 55,000 men), failed to reckon with the autumn weather, attacked without the advantage of surprise and without Bulgarian support. Elementary precautions such as issuing winter clothing had not been taken. Nor had Mussolini considered the warnings of the Italian Commission of War Production, that Italy would not be able to sustain a full year of continuous warfare until 1949.

During the six-month fight against Italy, the Hellenic army made territorial gains by eliminating Italian salients. Nevertheless, Greece did not have a substantial armaments industry and both its equipment and ammunition supplies increasingly relied on stocks captured by British forces from defeated Italian armies in North Africa. In order to man the Albanian battlefield, the Greek command was forced to withdraw forces from Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace because Greek forces could not protect Greece's entire border. The Greek command decided to support its success in Albania, regardless of the risk of a German attack from the Bulgarian border.

Hitler intervened on 4 November 1940, four days after British troops arrived at Crete and Lemnos. Although Greece was neutral until the Italian invasion, the British troops that were sent as defensive aid created the possibility of a frontier to the German southern flank. He ordered his Army General Staff to attack Northern Greece from bases in Romania and Bulgaria in support of his master plan to deprive the British of Mediterranean bases. On 12 November, the German Armed Forces High Command issued Directive No. 18, in which they scheduled simultaneous operations against Gibraltar and Greece for the following January. However, in December 1940, German ambition in the Mediterranean underwent considerable revision when Spain's General Francisco Franco rejected the Gibraltar attack. Consequently, Germany's offensive in southern Europe was restricted to the Greek campaign. The Armed Forces High Command issued Directive No. 20 on 13 December 1940, outlining the Greek campaign under the code designation "Operation Marita". The plan was to occupy the northern coast of the Aegean Sea by March 1941 and to seize the entire Greek mainland, if necessary. During a hasty meeting of Hitler's staff after the unexpected 27 March Yugoslav coup d'état against the Yugoslav government, orders for the campaign in Kingdom of Yugoslavia were drafted, as well as changes to the plans for Greece. On 6 April, both Greece and Yugoslavia were to be attacked.

Britain was obliged to assist Greece by the Declaration of 1939, which stated that in the event of a threat to Greek or Romanian independence, "His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Greek or Romanian Government... all the support in their power. The first British effort was the deployment of Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons commanded by Air Commodore John D'Albiac that arrived in November 1940. With Greek government consent, British forces were dispatched to Crete on 31 October to guard Souda Bay, enabling the Greek government to redeploy the 5th Cretan Division to the mainland.

On 17 November 1940, Metaxas proposed a joint offensive in the Balkans to the British government, with Greek strongholds in southern Albania as the operational base. The British were reluctant to discuss Metaxas' proposal, because the troops necessary for implementing the Greek plan would seriously endanger operations in North Africa. During a meeting of British and Greek military and political leaders in Athens on 13 January 1941, General Alexandros Papagos—Commander-in-Chief of the Hellenic Army—asked Britain for nine fully equipped divisions and corresponding air support. The British responded that all they could offer was the immediate dispatch of a token force of less than divisional strength. This offer was rejected by the Greeks, who feared that the arrival of such a contingent would precipitate a German attack without giving them meaningful assistance. British help would be requested if and when German troops crossed the Danube from Romania into Bulgaria.

Little more than a month later, the British reconsidered. Winston Churchill aspired to recreate a Balkan Front comprising Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, and instructed Anthony Eden and Sir John Dill to resume negotiations with the Greek government. A meeting attended by Eden and the Greek leadership, including King George II, Prime Minister Alexandros Koryzis—the successor of Metaxas, who had died on 29 January 1941—and Papagos took place in Athens on 22 February, where they decided to send a British Empire expeditionary force. German troops had been massing in Romania and on 1 March, Wehrmacht forces began to move into Bulgaria. At the same time, the Bulgarian Army mobilised and took up positions along the Greek frontier.

On 2 March, Operation Lustre—the transportation of troops and equipment to Greece—began and 26 troopships arrived at the port of Piraeus. On 3 April, during a meeting of British, Yugoslav and Greek military representatives, the Yugoslavs promised to block the Struma valley in case of a German attack across their territory. During this meeting, Papagos stressed the importance of a joint Greco-Yugoslavian offensive against the Italians, as soon as the Germans launched their offensive. By 24 April more than 62,000 Empire troops (British, Australians, New Zealanders, Palestinians and Cypriots), had arrived in Greece, comprising the 6th Australian Division, the New Zealand 2nd Division and the British 1st Armoured Brigade. The three formations later became known as 'W' Force, after their commander, Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson. Air Commodore Sir John D'Albiac commanded British air forces in Greece.

## Topography

To enter Northern Greece, the German army had to cross the Rhodope Mountains, which offered few river valleys or mountain passes capable of accommodating the movement of large military units. Two invasion courses were located west of Kyustendil; another was along the Yugoslav-Bulgarian border, via the Struma river valley to the south. Greek border fortifications had been adapted for the terrain and a formidable defence system covered the few available roads. The Struma and Nestos rivers cut across the mountain range along the Greek-Bulgarian frontier and both of their valleys were protected by strong fortifications, as part of the larger Metaxas Line. This system of concrete pillboxes and field fortifications,

constructed along the Bulgarian border in the late 1930s, was built on principles similar to those of the Maginot Line. Its strength resided mainly in the inaccessibility of the intermediate terrain leading up to the defence positions.

Greece's mountainous terrain favoured a defensive strategy and the high ranges of the Rhodope, Epirus, Pindus and Olympus mountains offered many defensive opportunities. However, air power was required to protect defending ground forces from entrapment in the many defiles. Although an invading force from Albania could be stopped by a relatively small number of troops positioned in the high Pindus Mountains, the north-eastern part of the country was difficult to defend against an attack from the north.

Following a March conference in Athens, the British believed that they would combine with Greek forces to occupy the Haliacmon Line—a short front facing north-eastwards along the Vermio Mountains and the lower Haliacmon river. Papagos awaited clarification from the Yugoslav government and later proposed to hold the Metaxas Line—by then a symbol of national security to the Greek populace—and not withdraw divisions from Albania. He argued that to do so would be seen as a concession to the Italians. The strategically important port of Thessaloniki lay practically undefended and transportation of British troops to the city remained dangerous. Papagos proposed to take advantage of the area's terrain and prepare fortifications, while also protecting Thessaloniki.

General Dill described Papagos' attitude as "unaccommodating and defeatist" and argued that his plan ignored the fact that Greek troops and artillery were capable of only token resistance. The British believed that the Greek rivalry with Bulgaria—the Metaxas Line was designed specifically for war with Bulgaria—as well as their traditionally good terms with the Yugoslavs—left their north-western border largely undefended. Despite their awareness that the line was likely to collapse in the event of a German thrust from the Struma and Axios rivers, the British eventually acceded to the Greek command. On 4 March, Dill accepted the plans for the Metaxas line and on 7 March agreement was ratified by the British Cabinet. The overall command was to be retained by Papagos and the Greek and British commands agreed to fight a delaying action in the north-east. The British did not move their troops, because General Wilson regarded them as too weak to protect such a broad front. Instead, he took a position some 40 miles (64 kilometres) west of the Axios, across the Haliacmon Line. The two main objectives in establishing this position were to maintain contact with the Hellenic army in Albania and to deny German access to Central Greece. This had the advantage of requiring a smaller force than other options, while allowing more preparation time. However, it meant abandoning nearly the whole of Northern Greece, which was unacceptable to the Greeks for political and psychological reasons. Moreover, the line's left flank was susceptible to flanking from Germans operating through the Monastir Gap in Yugoslavia. However, the rapid disintegration of the Yugoslav Army and a German thrust into the rear of the Vermion position was not expected.

The German strategy was based on using so-called "blitzkrieg" methods that had proved successful during the invasions of Western Europe. Their effectiveness was confirmed during the invasion of Yugoslavia. The German command again coupled ground troops and armour with air support and rapidly drove into the territory. Once Thessaloniki was captured, Athens and the port of Piraeus became principal targets. Piraeus, was virtually destroyed by bombing on the night of the 6/7 April. The loss of Piraeus and the Isthmus of Corinth would fatally compromise withdrawal and evacuation of British and Greek forces.

The Fifth Yugoslav Army took responsibility for the south-eastern border between Kriva Palanka and the Greek border. However, the Yugoslav troops were not

fully mobilised and lacked adequate equipment and weapons. Following the entry of German forces into Bulgaria, the majority of Greek troops were evacuated from Western Thrace. By this time, Greek forces defending the Bulgarian border totaled roughly 70,000 men (sometimes labeled the "Greek Second Army" in English and German sources, although no such formation existed). The remainder of the Greek forces—14 divisions (often erroneously referred to as the "Greek First Army" by foreign sources)—was committed in Albania.

On 28 March, Greek forces in Central Macedonia—the 12th and 20th Infantry Divisions—were put under the command of General Wilson, who established his headquarters to the north-west of Larissa. The New Zealand division took position north of Mount Olympus, while the Australian division blocked the Haliacmon valley up to the Vermion range. The RAF continued to operate from airfields in Central and Southern Greece; however, few planes could be diverted to the theatre. The British forces were near to fully motorised, but their equipment was more suited to desert warfare than to Greece's steep mountain roads. They were short of tanks and anti-aircraft guns and the lines of communication across the Mediterranean were vulnerable, because each convoy had to pass close to Axis-held islands in the Aegean; despite the British Royal Navy's domination of the Aegean Sea. These logistical problems were aggravated by the limited availability of shipping and Greek port capacity.

The German Twelfth Army—under the command of Field Marshal Wilhelm List—was charged with the execution of Operation Marita. His army was composed of six units:

1. First Panzer Group, under the command of General Ewald von Kleist.
2. XL Panzer Corps, under Lieutenant General Georg Stumme.
3. XVIII Mountain Corps, under Lieutenant General Franz Böhme.
4. XXX Infantry Corps, under Lieutenant General Otto Hartmann.
5. L Infantry Corps, under Lieutenant General Georg Lindemann.
6. 16th Panzer Division, deployed behind the Turkish-Bulgarian border to support the Bulgarian forces in case of a Turkish attack.<sup>[78]</sup>

### **German plan of attack and assembly**

The German plan of attack was influenced by their army's experiences during the Battle of France. Their strategy was to create a diversion through the campaign in Albania, thus stripping the Hellenic Army of manpower for the defence of their Yugoslavian and Bulgarian borders. By driving armoured wedges through the weakest links of the defence chain, penetrating Allied territory would not require substantial armour behind an infantry advance. Once Southern Yugoslavia was overrun by German armour, the Metaxas Line could be outflanked by highly mobile forces thrusting southward from Yugoslavia. Thus, possession of Monastir and the Axios valley leading to Thessaloniki became essential for such an outflanking manoeuvre.

The Yugoslav coup d'état led to a sudden change in the plan of attack and confronted the Twelfth Army with a number of difficult problems. According to the 28 March Directive No. 25, the Twelfth Army was to create a mobile task force to attack via Niš toward Belgrade. With only nine days left before their final deployment, every hour became valuable and each fresh assembly of troops took time to mobilise. By the evening of 5 April, the forces intended to enter southern Yugoslavia and Greece had been assembled.

## German invasion

Thrust across southern Yugoslavia and the drive to Thessaloniki



German advance until 9 April 1941, when the 2nd Panzer Division seized Thessaloniki.

At dawn on 6 April, the German armies invaded Greece, while the Luftwaffe began an intensive bombardment of Belgrade. The XL Panzer Corps—planned to attack across southern Yugoslavia—began their assault at 05:30. They pushed across the Bulgarian frontier at two separate points. By the evening of 8 April, the 73rd Infantry Division captured Prilep, severing an important rail line between Belgrade and Thessaloniki and isolating Yugoslavia from its allies. On the evening of 9 April, Stumme deployed his forces north of Monastir, in preparation for attack toward Florina. This position threatened to encircle the Greeks in Albania and W Force in the area of Florina, Edessa and Katerini. While weak security detachments covered his rear against a surprise attack from central Yugoslavia, elements of the 9th Panzer Division drove westward to link up with the Italians at the Albanian border.

The 2nd Panzer Division (XVIII Mountain Corps) entered Yugoslavia from the east on the morning of 6 April and advanced westward through the Struma Valley. It encountered little resistance, but was delayed by road clearance demolitions, mines and mud. Nevertheless, the division was able to reach the day's objective, the town of Strumica. On 7 April, a Yugoslav counter-attack against the division's northern flank was repelled, and the following day, the division forced its way across the mountains and overran the thinly manned defensive line of the Greek 19th Motorised Infantry Division south of Doiran Lake. Despite many delays along the mountain roads, an armoured advance guard dispatched toward Thessaloniki succeeded in entering the city by the morning of 9 April. Thessaloniki was taken after a long battle with three Greek divisions under the command of General Bakopoulos, and was followed by the surrender of the Greek East Macedonia Army Section, taking effect at 13:00 on 10 April. The British and Commonwealth forces then took over the defence of Greece, with the bulk of the Greek Army fighting to maintain their old positions in Albania.

## Greek-Yugoslav counteroffensive

On 7 April, the Yugoslav 3rd Army in the form of five infantry divisions (13th "Hercegovacka", 15th "Zetska", 25th "Vardarska", 31st "Kosovska" and 12th "Jadranska" Divisions, with the "Jadranska" acting as the reserve), after a false start due to the planting of a bogus order, launched a counteroffensive in northern Albania,

advancing from Debar, Prishtine and Dodgorica towards Elbasan. On 8 April, the Yugoslav vanguard, the "Komski" Cavalry Regiment crossed the treacherous Prokletije Mountains and captured the village of Koljegcava in the Valjbone River Valley, and the 31st "Kosovska" Division, supported by Savoia-Marchetti S.79K bombers from the 7th Bomber Regiment of the Royal Yugoslav Air Force (VVKJ), broke through the Italian positions in the Drin River Valley. The "Vardarska" Division, due to the fall of Skopje was forced to halt its operations in Albania. In the meantime, the Western Macedonian Field Army Section (WMFAS) under General Tsolakoglou, comprising the 9th and 13th Greek Divisions, advanced in support of the Royal Yugoslav Army, capturing some 250 Italians on 8 April.<sup>[88]</sup> The Greeks were tasked with advancing towards Durrës. On 9 April, the Zetska Division advanced towards Shkodër and the Yugoslav cavalry regiment reached the Drin River, but the Kosovska Division had to halt its advance due to the appearance of German units near Prizren. The Yugoslav-Greek offensive was supported by S.79K bombers from the 66th and 81st Bomber Groups of the VVKJ, that attacked airfields and camps around Shkodër, as well as the port of Durrës and Italian troop concentrations and bridges on the Drin and Buene rivers and Durazzo Tirana and Zara.

Between 11–13 April 1941, with German and Italian troops advancing on its rear areas, the Zetska Division was forced to retreat back to the Pronisat River by the Italian 131st Centauro Armoured Division, where it remained until the end of the campaign on 16 April. The Centauro Division then advanced upon the Yugoslav fleet base of Kotor in Montenegro, also occupying Cetinje and Podgorica.

### **Metaxas Line**

The Metaxas Line was defended by the Eastern Macedonia Army Section, which comprised the 7th, 14th and 18th Infantry Divisions under the command of Lieutenant General Konstantinos Bakopoulos. The line ran for about 170 kilometres (110 miles) along the river Nestos to the east and then further east, following the Bulgarian border as far as Mount Beles near the Yugoslav border. The fortifications were designed to garrison over 200 000 troops, but the actual number was roughly 70 000. As a result the line's defences were thinly spread. Some 950 men under the command of Major George Douratsos of Major-General Konstantinos Papakonstantinou's 14th Division defended Fort Rupel.

The Germans had to break the line to capture Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city, with a strategic port. The attack started on 6 April with one infantry unit and two divisions of the XVIII Mountain Corps. Due to strong resistance, the first day of the attack yielded little progress in breaking the line. A German report at the end of the first day described how the German 5th Mountain Division "was repulsed in the Rupel Pass despite strongest air support and sustained considerable casualties". Two German battalions managed to get within 600 feet of Fort Rupel on 6 April, but were practically destroyed. Of the 24 forts that made up the Metaxas Line, only two had fallen and then only after they had been destroyed. In the following days, the Germans pummelled the forts with artillery and dive bombers and reinforced the 125th Infantry Regiment. A 7,000 foot (2100 meter) high snow-covered mountainous passage considered inaccessible by the Greeks was successfully crossed by the 6th Mountain Division, which reached the rail line to Thessaloniki on the evening of 7 April. The 5th Mountain Division, together with the reinforced 125th Infantry Regiment, penetrated across the Struma river under great hardship, attacking along both banks and clearing bunkers until they reached their objective location on 7 April. Heavy casualties caused them to temporarily withdraw. The 72nd Infantry Division advanced from Nevrokop across the mountains. Its advance was delayed by a shortage of pack animals, medium artillery and mountain equipment. Only on the evening of 9 April did it reach the area northeast of Serres. Most fortresses—like Fort Roupel, Echinós, Arpalouki, Paliouriones, Perithori, Karadag, Lisse and Istibey—held until the Germans occupied Thessaloniki on 9 April, at which point they surrendered under General Bakopoulos' orders. Nevertheless, minor isolated fortresses continued to fight for a few days more and

were not taken until heavy artillery was used against them. This gave time for some retreating troops to evacuate by sea. Although eventually broken, the defenders of the Metaxas Line succeeded in delaying the German advance.

### **Capitulation of the Hellenic army in Macedonia**

The XXX Infantry Corps on the left wing reached its designated objective on the evening of 8 April, when the 164th Infantry Division captured Xanthi. The 50th Infantry Division advanced far beyond Komotini towards the Nestos river. Both divisions arrived the next day. On 9 April, the Greek forces defending the Metaxas Line capitulated unconditionally following the collapse of Greek resistance east of the Axios river. In a 9 April estimate of the situation, Field Marshal List commented that as a result of the swift advance of the mobile units, his 12th Army was now in a favorable position to access central Greece by breaking the Greek build-up behind the Axios river. On the basis of this estimate, List requested the transfer of the 5th Panzer Division from First Panzer Group to the XL Panzer Corps. He reasoned that its presence would give additional punch to the German thrust through the Monastir Gap. For the continuation of the campaign, he formed an eastern group under the command of XVIII Mountain Corps and a western group led by XL Panzer Corps.

### **Breakthrough to Kozani**

By the morning of 10 April, the XL Panzer Corps had finished its preparations for the continuation of the offensive and advanced in the direction of Kozani. The 5th Panzer Division, advancing from Skopje encountered a Greek division tasked with defending Monastir Gap, rapidly defeating the defenders. First contact with Allied troops was made north of Vevi at 11:00 on 10 April. German SS troops seized Vevi on 11 April, but were stopped at the Klidi Pass just south of town, where a mixed Empire-Greek formation—known as Mackay Force—was assembled to, as Wilson put it, "...stop a blitzkrieg down the Florina valley." During the next day, the SS regiment reconnoitred the Allied positions and at dusk launched a frontal attack against the pass. Following heavy fighting, the Germans broke through the defence. On 13 April, 70 supporting German bombers attacked Volos, the port almost being completely destroyed. By the morning of 14 April, the spearheads of the 9th Panzer Division reached Kozani.

### **Olympus and Servia passes**

Wilson faced the prospect of being pinned by Germans operating from Thessaloniki, while being flanked by the German XL Panzer Corps descending through the Monastir Gap. On 13 April, he withdrew all British forces to the Haliacmon river and then to the narrow pass at Thermopylae. On 14 April, the 9th Panzer Division established a bridgehead across the Haliacmon River, but an attempt to advance beyond this point was stopped by intense Allied fire. This defence had three main components: the Platamon tunnel area between Olympus and the sea, the Olympus pass itself and the Servia pass to the south-east. By channelling the attack through these three defiles, the new line offered far greater defensive strength. The defences of the Olympus and Servia passes consisted of the 4th New Zealand Brigade, 5th New Zealand Brigade and the 16th Australian Brigade. For the next three days, the advance of the 9th Panzer Division was stalled in front of these resolutely held positions.

A ruined castle dominated the ridge across which the coastal pass led to Platamon. During the night of April 15, a German motorcycle battalion supported by a tank battalion attacked the ridge, but the Germans were repulsed by the 21st New Zealand Battalion under Colonel Macky, which suffered heavy losses in the process. Later that day, a German armoured regiment arrived and struck the coastal and inland flanks of the battalion, but the New Zealanders held. After being reinforced during the night of

the 15th–16th, the Germans assembled a tank battalion, an infantry battalion and a motorcycle battalion. The infantry attacked the New Zealanders' left company at dawn, while the tanks attacked along the coast several hours later. The New Zealanders soon found themselves enveloped on both sides, after the failure of the Western Macedonia Army to defend the Albanian town of Koritsa that fell unopposed to the Italian 9th Army on 15 April, forcing the British to abandon the Mount Olympus position and resulting in the capture of 20,000 Greek troops.

The New Zealand battalion withdrew, crossing the Pineios river; by dusk, they had reached the western exit of the Pineios Gorge, suffering only light casualties. Macky was informed that it was "essential to deny the gorge to the enemy until 19 April even if it meant extinction". He sank a crossing barge at the western end of the gorge once all his men were across and set up defences. The 21st Battalion was reinforced by the Australian 2/2nd Battalion and later by the 2/3rd. This force became known as "Allen force" after Brigadier "Tubby" Allen. The 2/5th and 2/11th battalions moved to the Elatia area south-west of the gorge and were ordered to hold the western exit possibly for three or four days.

On 16 April, Wilson met Papagos at Lamia and informed him of his decision to withdraw to Thermopylae. Lieutenant-General Thomas Blamey divided responsibility between generals Mackay and Freyberg during the leapfrogging move to Thermopylae. Mackay's force was assigned the flanks of the New Zealand Division as far south as an east-west line through Larissa and to oversee the withdrawal through Domokos to Thermopylae of the Savage and Zarkos Forces and finally of Lee Force; Brigadier Harold Charrington's 1st Armoured Brigade was to cover the withdrawal of Savage Force to Larissa and thereafter the withdrawal of the 6th Division under whose command it would come; overseeing the withdrawal of Allen Force which was to move along the same route as the New Zealand Division. The British Empire forces remained under attack throughout the withdrawal.

On the morning of 18 April, the Battle of Tempe Gorge, the struggle for the Pineios Gorge, was over when German armoured infantry crossed the river on floats and 6th Mountain Division troops worked their way around the New Zealand battalion, which was subsequently dispersed. On 19 April, the first XVIII Mountain Corps troops entered Larissa and took possession of the airfield, where the British had left their supply dump intact. The seizure of ten truckloads of rations and fuel enabled the spearhead units to continue without ceasing. The port of Volos, at which the British had re-embarked numerous units during the prior few days, fell on 21 April; there, the Germans captured large quantities of valuable diesel and crude oil.

### **Withdrawal and surrender of the Greek Epirus Army**

As the invading Germans advanced deep into Greek territory, the Epirus Army Section of the Greek army operating in Albania was reluctant to retreat. However, by the middle of March, especially after the Telepene offensive, the Greek army had suffered, according to British estimates, 5000 casualties. Moreover, the Italian offensive revealed a "chronic shortage of arms and equipment." The Greeks were fast approaching the end of their logistical tether.

General Wilson described this unwillingness to retreat as "the fetishistic doctrine that not a yard of ground should be yielded to the Italians." Churchill also criticized the Greek Army commanders for ignoring British advice to abandon Albania and avoid encirclement. Lieutenant-General George Stumme's Fortieth Corps captured the Florina-Vevi Pass on 11 April, but unseasonal snowy weather then halted his advance. On 12 April, he resumed the advance, but spent the whole day fighting Brigadier Charrington's 1st Armoured Brigade at Proastion. It was not until 13 April that the first Greek elements began to withdraw toward the Pindus mountains. The Allies' retreat to Thermopylae uncovered a route across the Pindus mountains by which the Germans might flank the Hellenic army in a rearguard action. An elite SS formation—

the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler brigade—was assigned the mission of cutting off the Greek Epirus Army's line of retreat from Albania by driving westward to the Metsovon pass and from there to Ioannina.<sup>[124]</sup> On 13 April, attack aircraft from 21, 23 and 33 Squadrons from the Hellenic Air Force (RHAF), attacked Italian positions in Albania. That same day, heavy fighting took place at Kleisoura pass, where the Greek 20th Division covering the Greek withdrawal, fought in a determined manner, delaying Stumme's advance practically a whole day. The withdrawal extended across the entire Albanian front, with the Italians in hesitant pursuit. On 15 April, Regia Aeronautica fighters attacked the (RHAF) base at Paramythia, 30 miles south of Greece's border with Albania, destroying or putting out of action 17 VVKJ aircraft that had recently arrived from Yugoslavia.

General Papagos rushed Greek units to the Metsovon pass where the Germans were expected to attack. On 14 April a pitched battle between several Greek units and the LSSAH brigade—which had by then reached Grevena—erupted. The Greek 13th and Cavalry Divisions lacked the equipment necessary to fight against an armoured unit but nevertheless fought on till the next day, when the defenders were finally encircled and overwhelmed. On 18 April, General Wilson in a meeting with Papagos, informed him that the British and Commonwealth forces at Thermopylae would carry on fighting till the first week of May, providing that Greek forces from Albania could redeploy and cover the left flank. On 21 April, the Germans advanced further and captured Ioannina, the final supply route of the Greek Epirus Army. Allied newspapers dubbed the Hellenic army's fate a modern day Greek tragedy. Historian and former war-correspondent Christopher Buckley—when describing the fate of the Hellenic army—stated that "one experience[d] a genuine Aristotelian catharsis, an awe-inspiring sense of the futility of all human effort and all human courage."

On 20 April, the commander of Greek forces in Albania—General Georgios Tsolakoglou—accepted the hopelessness of the situation and offered to surrender his army, which then consisted of fourteen divisions. Generals Ioannis Pitsikas and Georgios Bakos had already warned General Papagos on 14 April that morale in the Epirus Army was wearing thin, and regrettably combat stress and exhaustion had resulted in officers taking the decision to put deserters before firing squads. Nevertheless, Papagos condemned Tsolakoglou for his decision to not continue fighting. General Blamey also criticized at the time, Tsolakoglou's decision to surrender without permission from General Papagos. Historian John Keegan writes that Tsolakoglou "was so determined... to deny the Italians the satisfaction of a victory they had not earned that... he opened [a] quite unauthorised parley with the commander of the German SS division opposite him, Sepp Dietrich, to arrange a surrender to the Germans alone." On strict orders from Hitler, negotiations were kept secret from the Italians and the surrender was accepted. Outraged by this decision, Mussolini ordered counter-attacks against the Greek forces, which were repulsed, but at some cost to the defenders. The German Air Force intervened in the renewed fighting, and Ioannina was practically destroyed by Stukas. It took a personal representation from Mussolini to Hitler to organize Italian participation in the armistice that was concluded on 23 April. Greek soldiers were not rounded up as prisoners of war and were allowed instead to go home after the demobilisation of their units, while their officers were permitted to retain their side arms.

### **Thermopylae position**

As early as 16 April, the German command realised that the British were evacuating troops on ships at Volos and Piraeus. The campaign then took on the character of a pursuit. For the Germans, it was now primarily a question of maintaining contact with the retreating British forces and foiling their evacuation plans. German infantry divisions were withdrawn due to its limited mobility. The 2nd and 5th Panzer Divisions, the 1st SS Motorised Infantry Regiment and both mountain divisions launched a pursuit of the Allied forces.

To allow an evacuation of the main body of British forces, Wilson ordered the rearguard to make a last stand at the historic Thermopylae pass, the gateway to Athens. General Freyberg's 2nd New Zealand Division was given the task of defending the coastal pass, while Mackay's 6th Australian Division was to hold the village of Brallos. After the battle Mackay was quoted as saying "I did not dream of evacuation; I thought that we'd hang on for about a fortnight and be beaten by weight of numbers." When the order to retreat was received on the morning of 23 April, it was decided that the two positions were to be held by one brigade each. These brigades, the 19th Australian and 6th New Zealand were to hold the passes as long as possible, allowing the other units to withdraw. The Germans attacked at 11:30 on 24 April, met fierce resistance, lost 15 tanks and sustained considerable casualties. The Allies held out the entire day; with the delaying action accomplished, they retreated in the direction of the evacuation beaches and set up another rearguard at Thebes. The Panzer units launching a pursuit along the road leading across the pass made slow progress because of the steep gradient and difficult hairpin bends.

### **German drive on Athens**

After abandoning the Thermopylae area, the British rearguard withdrew to an improvised switch position south of Thebes, where they erected a last obstacle in front of Athens. The motorcycle battalion of the 2nd Panzer Division, which had crossed to the island of Euboea to seize the port of Chalcis and had subsequently returned to the mainland, was given the mission of outflanking the British rearguard. The motorcycle troops encountered only slight resistance and on the morning of 27 April 1941, the first Germans entered Athens, followed by armoured cars, tanks and infantry. They captured intact large quantities of petroleum, oil and lubricants ("POL"), several thousand tons of ammunition, ten trucks loaded with sugar and ten truckloads of other rations in addition to various other equipment, weapons and medical supplies. The people of Athens had been expecting the Germans for several days and confined themselves to their homes with their windows shut. The previous night, Athens Radio had made the following announcement:

You are listening to the voice of Greece. Greeks, stand firm, proud and dignified. You must prove yourselves worthy of your history. The valor and victory of our army has already been recognised. The righteousness of our cause will also be recognised. We did our duty honestly. Friends! Have Greece in your hearts, live inspired with the fire of her latest triumph and the glory of our army. Greece will live again and will be great, because she fought honestly for a just cause and for freedom. Brothers! Have courage and patience. Be stout hearted. We will overcome these hardships. Greeks! With Greece in your minds you must be proud and dignified. We have been an honest nation and brave soldiers.

The Germans drove straight to the Acropolis and raised the Nazi flag. According to the most popular account of the events, the Evzone soldier on guard duty, Konstantinos Koukidis, took down the Greek flag, refusing to hand it to the invaders, wrapped himself in it, and jumped off the Acropolis. Whether the story was true or not, many Greeks believed it and viewed the soldier as a martyr.

### **Evacuation of Empire forces**

General Archibald Wavell, the commander of British Army forces in the Middle East, when in Greece from 11–13 April had warned Wilson that he must expect no reinforcements and had authorised Major General Freddie de Guingand to discuss evacuation plans with certain responsible officers. Nevertheless, the British 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, Papagos made the first move when he suggested to Wilson that W Force be withdrawn. Wilson informed Middle East Headquarters and on 17 April, Rear admiral H. T. Baillie-Grohman was sent to Greece to prepare for the evacuation. That day Wilson hastened to Athens where he attended

a conference with the King, Papagos, d'Albiac and Rear admiral Turle. In the evening, after telling the King that he felt he had failed him in the task entrusted to him, Prime Minister Koryzidis committed suicide. On 21 April, the final decision to evacuate Empire forces to Crete and Egypt was taken and Wavell—in confirmation of verbal instructions—sent his written orders to Wilson

5,200 men, mostly from the 5th New Zealand Brigade, were evacuated on the night of 24 April, from Porto Rafti of East Attica, while the 4th New Zealand Brigade remained to block the narrow road to Athens, dubbed the 24 Hour Pass by the New Zealanders. On 25 April (Anzac Day), the few RAF squadrons left Greece (D'Albiac established his headquarters in Heraklion, Crete) and some 10,200 Australian troops evacuated from Nafplio and Megara. 2,000 more men had to wait until 27 April, because Ulster Prince ran aground in shallow waters close to Nafplio. Because of this event, the Germans realised that the evacuation was also taking place from the ports of the eastern Peloponnese.

The Greek Navy and Merchant Marine played an important part in the evacuation of the Allied forces to Crete and suffered heavy losses as a result.

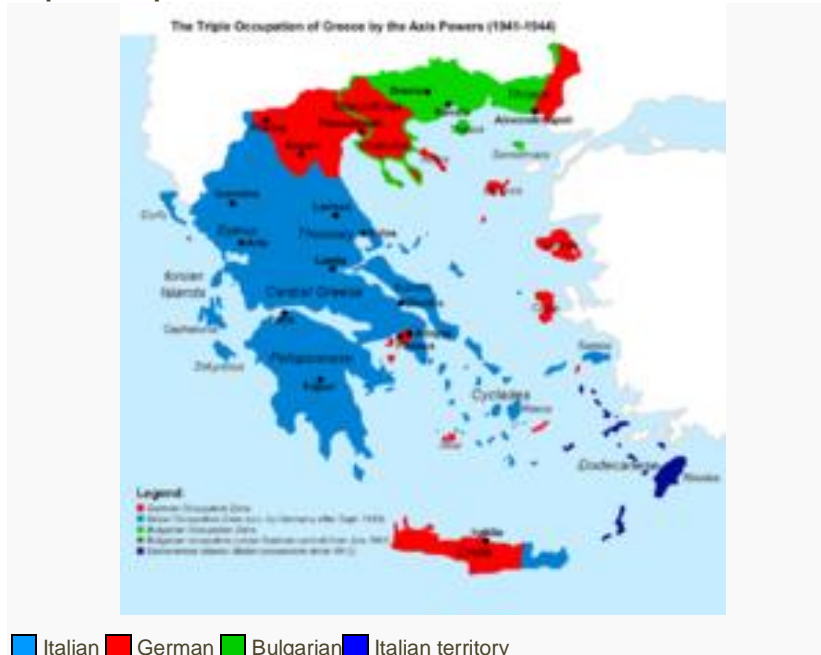
On 25 April the Germans staged an airborne operation to seize the bridges over the Corinth canal, with the double aim of cutting off the British line of retreat and securing their own way across the isthmus. The attack met with initial success, until a stray British shell destroyed the bridge. The 1st SS Motorised Infantry Regiment ("LSSAH"), assembled at Ioannina, thrust along the western foothills of the Pindus Mountains via Arta to Missolonghi and crossed over to the Peloponnese at Patras in an effort to gain access to the isthmus from the west. Upon their arrival at 17:30 on 27 April, the SS forces learned that the paratroops had already been relieved by Army units advancing from Athens.

The Dutch troop ship Slamet was part of a convoy evacuating about 3,000 British, Australian and New Zealand troops from Nafplio in the Peloponnese. As the convoy headed south in the Argolic Gulf on the morning of 27 April, it was attacked by Staffel of nine Junkers Ju 87s of Stukageschwader 77, damaging Slamet and setting her on fire. The destroyer HMS Diamond rescued about 600 survivors and HMS Wryneck came to her aid, but as the two destroyers headed for Souda Bay in Crete another Ju 87 attack sank them both. The total number of deaths from the three sinking's was almost 1,000. Only 27 crew from Wryneck, 20 crew from Diamond, 11 crew and eight evacuated soldiers from Slamet survived.

The erection of a temporary bridge across the Corinth canal permitted 5th Panzer Division units to pursue the Allied forces across the Peloponnese. Driving via Argos to Kalamata, from where most Allied units had already begun to evacuate, they reached the south coast on 29 April, where they were joined by SS troops arriving from Pyrgos. The fighting on the Peloponnese consisted of small-scale engagements with isolated groups of British troops who had been unable to reach the evacuation point. The attack came days too late to cut off the bulk of the British troops in Central Greece, but isolated the Australian 16th and 17th Brigades. By 30 April the evacuation of about 50,000 soldiers was completed, but was heavily contested by the German Luftwaffe, which sank at least 26 troop-laden ships. The Germans captured around 8,000 Empire (including 2,000 Cypriot and Palestinian) and Yugoslav troops in Kalamata who had not been evacuated, while liberating many Italian prisoners from POW camps.

## Aftermath

### Triple occupation



On 13 April 1941, Hitler issued Directive No. 27, including his occupation policy for Greece. He finalized jurisdiction in the Balkans with Directive No. 31 issued on 9 June. Mainland Greece was divided between Germany, Italy and Bulgaria, with Italy occupying the bulk of the country (see map opposite). German forces occupied the strategically more important areas of Athens, Thessaloniki, Central Macedonia and several Aegean islands, including most of Crete. They also occupied Florina, which was claimed by both Italy and Bulgaria. Bulgaria, which had not participated in the invasion of Greece, occupied most of Thrace on the same day that Tsolakoglou offered his surrender. The goal was to gain an Aegean Sea outlet in Western Thrace and Eastern Macedonia. The Bulgarians occupied territory between the Struma river and a line of demarcation running through Alexandroupoli and Svilengrad west of the Evros River. Italian troops started occupying the Ionian and Aegean islands on 28 April. On 2 June, they occupied the Peloponnese; on 8 June, Thessaly; and on 12 June, most of Attica. The occupation of Greece—during which civilians suffered terrible hardships, many dying from privation and hunger—proved to be a difficult and costly task. Several resistance groups launched guerrilla attacks against the occupying forces and set up espionage networks.

### Battle of Crete

On 25 April 1941, King George II and his government left the Greek mainland for Crete, which was attacked by Nazi forces on 20 May 1941. The Germans employed parachute forces in a massive airborne invasion and attacked the three main airfields of the island in Maleme, Rethymno and Heraklion. After seven days of fighting and tough resistance, Allied commanders decided that the cause was hopeless and ordered a withdrawal from Sfakia. By 1 June 1941, the evacuation was complete and the island was under German occupation. In light of the heavy casualties suffered by the elite 7th Fliegerdivision, Hitler forbade further airborne operations. General Kurt Student would dub Crete "the graveyard of the German paratroopers" and a "disastrous victory." During the night of 24 May, George II and his government were evacuated from Crete to Egypt.

## Assessments

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The Greek campaign ended with a complete German and Italian victory. The British did not have the military resources to permit them to carry out simultaneous large-scale operations in North Africa and the Balkans. Moreover, even had they been able to block the Axis advance, they would have been unable to exploit the situation by a counter-thrust across the Balkans. The British came very near to holding Crete and perhaps other islands that would have provided air support for naval operations throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

In enumerating the reasons for the complete Axis victory in Greece, the following factors were of greatest significance:

1. Germany superiority in ground forces and equipment;
2. The bulk of the Greek army was occupied fighting the Italians on the Albanian front.
3. German air supremacy combined with the inability of the Greeks to provide the RAF with adequate airfields;
4. Inadequacy of British expeditionary forces, since the Imperial force available was small;
5. Poor condition of the Hellenic Army and its shortages of modern equipment;
6. Inadequate port, road and railway facilities;
7. Absence of a unified command and lack of cooperation between the British, Greek and Yugoslav forces;
8. Turkey's strict neutrality; and
9. The early collapse of Yugoslav resistance.

## Criticism of British actions

After the Allies' defeat, the decision to send British forces into Greece faced fierce criticism in Britain. Field Marshal Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff during World War II, considered intervention in Greece to be "a definite strategic blunder", as it denied Wavell the necessary reserves to complete the conquest of Italian-held Libya, or to successfully withstand Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps March offensive. It thus prolonged the North African Campaign, which otherwise might have been successfully concluded during 1941.

In 1947, de Guingand asked the British government to recognise its mistaken strategy in Greece. Buckley countered that if Britain had not honoured its 1939 commitment to Greece, it would have severely damaged the ethical basis of its struggle against Nazi Germany. According to Historian Heinz Richter, Churchill tried through the campaign in Greece to influence the political atmosphere in the United States and insisted on this strategy even after the defeat. According to Keegan, "the Greek campaign had been an old-fashioned gentlemen's war, with honour given and accepted by brave adversaries on each side" and the vastly outnumbered Greek and Allied forces, "had, rightly, the sensation of having fought the good fight." It has also been suggested the British strategy was to create a barrier in Greece, to protect Turkey, the only (neutral) country standing between an Axis block in the Balkans and the oil-rich Middle East. However, ultimately, the British intervention in Greece was considered a fiasco. Martin van Creveld believes that the British did everything in their power to scuttle all attempts at a separate peace between the Greeks and the Italians in order to keep the Greeks fighting so as to draw Italian divisions away from North Africa.

Freyberg and Blamey also had serious doubts about the feasibility of the operation, but failed to express their reservations and apprehensions. The campaign caused a furore in Australia, when it became known that when he received his first warning of the move to Greece on 18 February 1941, General Blamey was worried, but had not informed the Australian Government. He had been told by Wavell that Prime

Minister Menzies had approved the plan. Indeed, the proposal had been accepted by a meeting of the War Cabinet in London at which Menzies was present, but the Australian Prime Minister had been told by Churchill that both Freyberg and Blamey approved of the expedition. On 5 March, in a letter to Menzies, Blamey said that "the plan is, of course, what I feared: piecemeal dispatch to Europe" and the next day, he called the operation "most hazardous". However, thinking that he was agreeable, the Australian Government had already committed the Australian Imperial Force to the Greek Campaign.

### Impact on Operation Barbarossa

In 1942, members of the British Parliament characterised the campaign in Greece as a "political and sentimental decision". Eden rejected the criticism and argued that the UK's decision was unanimous and asserted that the Battle of Greece delayed the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union. This is an argument that historians such as Keegan used to assert that Greek resistance was a turning point in World War II. According to filmmaker and friend of Adolf Hitler Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler said that "if the Italians hadn't attacked Greece and needed our help, the war would have taken a different course. We could have anticipated the Russian cold by weeks and conquered Leningrad and Moscow. There would have been no Stalingrad". Despite his reservations, Brooke seems also to have conceded that the Balkan Campaign delayed the offensive against the Soviet Union.

Bradley and Buell conclude that "although no single segment of the Balkan campaign forced the Germans to delay Barbarossa, obviously the entire campaign did prompt them to wait." On the other hand, Richter calls Eden's arguments a "falsification of history". Basil Liddell Hart and de Guingand point out that the delay of the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union was not among Britain's strategic goals and as a result the possibility of such a delay could not have affected its decisions about Operation Marita. In 1952, the Historical Branch of the UK Cabinet Office concluded that the Balkan Campaign had no influence on the launching of Operation Barbarossa. According to Robert Kirchubel, "the main causes for deferring Barbarossa's start from 15 May to 22 June were incomplete logistical arrangements and an unusually wet winter that kept rivers at full flood until late spring." This however does not answer whether in the absence of these problems the campaign could have begun according to the original plan. Keegan writes:

In the aftermath, historians would measure its significance in terms of the delay Marita had or had not imposed on the unleashing of Barbarossa, an exercise ultimately to be judged profitless, since it was the Russian weather, not the contingencies of subsidiary campaigns, which determined Barbarossa's launch date.



*"They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old,  
Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn,  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We shall remember them"*