

1940 - EUROPE AT WAR

The Balkans Campaign

On October 28 1940 Italian forces in Albania crossed the border in to Greece to initiate one of the most surprising campaigns of the Second World War. Mussolini was a man obsessed with thoughts of personal greatness. He proclaimed the birth of a New Roman Empire which was to take shape under his direction. He was also envious of Hitler's territorial gains and began to look towards the Balkans region for territory that he could annex. Hitler had already stressed to Mussolini that he wished to avoid conflict in the Balkans as it might provoke Russian intervention. Italy had long coveted Greek territory and there had long been instances of clashes between the two countries over Italian claims to the Dodecanese islands.

On October 28 1940 the Greek ruler General Metaxas was presented with an ultimatum from the Italian government which demanded a passage for Italian troops to unspecified strategic points. Greek troops were to offer no resistance. Metaxas rejected the demand and war between the two countries began that same day. At first the Italian advance achieved no great speed and by November 2 it had come to a halt. Two days later, Greek forces on the central front counter attacked, their toughness, training and knowledge of the country were more than a match for the Italians superior numbers and armour. In this action alone the Greeks took 5,000 prisoners and claimed to have inflicted 20,000 casualties. At the same time the Greeks made steady progress on the coastal front. At sea, the Italians also suffered a severe reverse when on November 11 the British launched a torpedo-bomber attack on the Italian fleet anchored in Taranto harbour. Three Italian battleships were put out of action.

At this point the Italian government were seriously considering settling the situation by political intervention. Also the reverses that they had suffered brought about a change in the relationship between Hitler and Mussolini. For the first time Hitler advised the Italians how to run the war, he was convinced that they would be unable to defeat the Greeks unaided. Despite all the signs that Germany intended to attack Greece through Bulgaria the Greeks steadfastly refused to take up the British offers of troops until such time as German forces crossed the border. By early March the front line had been stabilized and plans were being drawn up for the British Army to support the Greeks in the event of a German attack although the Australian and New Zealand troops earmarked could not take up positions for at least three weeks.

A further Italian offensive began on March 9; Mussolini had hoped that this would convince Hitler of his ability to win victories of his own before the Germans could enter the battle. But this spring offensive also ground to a halt with significant losses of men and materials. Meanwhile, the Yugoslav king and his government rejected German moves to permit free passage of their troops through their country to the Greek frontier, this so angered Hitler that he immediately approved plans for an invasion of Yugoslavia. This commenced on April 6 with massive air raids on Belgrade. Simultaneous attacks by German and Hungarian troops from Hungary, Bulgaria and Rumania quickly overwhelmed the Yugoslav Army. With the Italian Army joining the advance on April 11 the Yugoslav government sought an immediate truce and this was signed on April 17 in Belgrade.

The first convoy of transports and warships with British troops and supplies left Egypt for Greece on March 4. Thereafter convoys sailed at three day intervals. To use the available troops to best advantage

it was agreed that the Greeks should defend the mountain sections of the front and the British the lowland areas thus ensuring that each would fight on ground best suited to them. Hitler had intended that the German attack on Greece should commence on April 1 but heavy rain had swamped the Bulgarian airfields and so this was delayed until April 6. The German use of infantry backed up by heavy artillery and dive bombers once again proved very effective and on April 8 the main front known as the Metaxas Line was outflanked. This effectively led to the capitulation of the Greek Eastern Army. Two days later German troops moving south linked up with Italian forces from Albania. With the German armour pressing them hard and the Luftwaffe dominating the skies only continual retreat could save the British from destruction. For eleven days from April 14 until April 25 abandoning broken down tanks the British retreated. Exhaustion lowered morale and monumental traffic jams contributed to chaos. From now onwards the Anglo-Greek forces fought a series of rear guard actions holding the Germans just long enough to allow the main force to retreat. Then the choice had to be made between fighting a battle impossible to win, or evacuation.

It was clear that evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force was going to be a difficult and complicated exercise. Small craft were collected from every available source, together with 7 cruisers, 20 destroyers and 19 troop ships. Sailors were organised in to beach parties and taught the routine learned at Dunkirk – the technique of loading exhausted soldiers in to small boats and ferrying them to the larger ones. Formations would move during the night to a dispersal area and remain there, quiet and hidden from the Luftwaffe, all day. The evacuation began on April 24 and the Greek Army capitulated on April 27. At this stage over 25,000 Australian troops had been safely evacuated but nearly 40,000 remained. On the night of April 28 more

than 21,000 men of the expeditionary force were taken off from five different beaches and the following night another 5,000 of the New Zealand Brigade were lifted from the extreme southern end of the Peloponnese. Amid vicious fighting final evacuation took place on April 29, but at the end some 7,000 men were left behind. Some of these had fought the rear guards all the way from the mountains of northern Greece nearly two weeks before. Militarily the decision to go to Greece's aid was a disaster; politically there were some advantages however, opinion in the United States was shocked by the German invasion and swung heavily to the Allies. Congress passed the Lend-Lease Bill and the all-important American aid began.

As the last troops left Greece on April 29 plans were already being drawn up in London to defend the Island of Crete as all the indications pointed to an invasion by air and sea. Communications on the island were poor; roads were poor and could only take one line of traffic. Bridges were unsafe for vehicles over 7 tons and there were no subsidiary roads only tracks.

Not long after first light on May 20 the sky filled with German aircraft, fighters strafing the troops on the ground and transport planes disgorging parachutists. Soon afterwards gliders also began to land to the west of the main airport at Maleme. Later in the day three further parachute regiments landed at Heraklion but were beaten off by the British and Australian defenders. For the attackers the first day was a disaster with none of the objectives being taken and all the time sustaining heavy casualties. The following day the Germans tried unsuccessfully to take the airfields at Maleme and Heraklion but with no success. Failure to quickly establish control of the airfields prevented much needed reinforcements from being flown in and this in turn delayed any invasion from the sea. In

addition by now the British Navy had found the invading convoy at sea and was steadily destroying much of the shipping. Eventually however on May 24 the Germans took Maleme airfield and began pouring in troops unmolested and the second phase of the battle began. At the same time fighter aircraft began operating from the airfield adding to the defenders difficulties. May 27 began with the loss of Suda Bay harbour thus permitting fresh troops to be brought in by sea and this saw the start of the all familiar Allied rear-guard actions and steady withdrawals towards the south coast of the Island. Evacuation began on May 29 with cover being provided by newly arrived Royal Marines and over the next two days over 10,000 men were taken off. Finally on May 31 the remaining 9,000 troops still fighting awaited to be evacuated; sadly in the event only 3,600 could be taken off leaving the remainder to face capitulation. Despite yet another defeat, Crete was described by the German General Student as the grave of the German Para troops.