



landscape with three figures
Κωνσταντίνος Παρθένης, 1935

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The invasion of Greece in 1941 and the Nazi hordes that never were....

Abstract

Despite the significance of the German invasion of Greece in 1941 within the international history of the Second World War, relatively little research has yet been conducted into many of its operational aspects. As a consequence, over the last 70 years a number of serious misconceptions have developed and been used to explain (or explain-away) British defeat within this campaign. Foremost is the notion of a huge disparity in numbers – against which Commonwealth troops, despite their courage and stoic resolve, could never stand. This key explanation is mistaken. By no means and by no measure did overwhelming German numbers push Imperial troops unwillingly out of Greece.

The German invasion of Greece, launched on 6 April 1941, was precipitated by the Italo-Greek war which began on 28 October the previous year. Mussolini's legions marched south from Albania, but after a period of initial success against the Greeks, Italian troops found themselves driven steadily back across the frontier. Greek military success in the closing months of 1940 meant that an earlier British pledge of military aid, should the nation be invaded by a foreign power, largely unnecessary. The pace of unfolding events in the Balkans during the early months of 1941, however, soon necessitated a strategic re-think in Athens and in London. Signs of a pending German intervention grew steadily more obvious and the Greeks at last,

but not without reservations, reversed their previous position and invited the British to send ground forces into Greece.

The corps-sized force despatched from Middle East Command to reinforce the Greeks against a looming German invasion was built around an Australian and a New Zealand infantry division. These two formations were supplemented by a British armoured brigade. There was little time, however, for this small corps to familiarise itself with Greece or the enormity of its task. In fact, when German troops thrust into Greece and Yugoslavia on 6 April the British and Dominion expeditionary force was still in the process of arriving from Egypt. The defences of southern Yugoslavia were crushed by the German advance within a few days and the ensuing invasion of Greece (Operation *Marita*) lasted just over three weeks. It was a rapid and decisive German victory. During the course of the campaign in mainland Greece British and Commonwealth troops (collectively known as W Force) retreated more than 400 kilometres in less than two weeks before ignominiously evacuating the country. This final withdrawal from Greece was carried out from the beaches near Athens and in the Peloponnese from 23-28 April. Around 50 000 Allied troops in total managed to escape the Greek mainland – many more than senior British officers originally thought might get away. A large proportion of these evacuees were shipped to Crete, which was subsequently attacked by German forces on 20 May.

There is no question that the Greek campaign was central to the strategic developments in Europe in early 1941 for both the Axis and the Allies. Despite its significance, however, very little academic attention has been focused onto Greece; and especially the operational aspects of this campaign. Certainly mention of the mainland Greek campaign is made in larger works on modern Greek military, and diplomatic history. So too, it appears as an episode in the official histories of the belligerents, personal memoirs, and biographies. Very few books, or even scholarly articles, however, have been published specifically on the period of the German invasion. Fewer still deal in any meaningful or detailed way with operational events.¹ Many of those that have focused on tactical and operational events are often uncritical narratives of event or colourful anecdotes.² Even if such works are included in the tally of works published on the Greek campaign, the sum total is still very small. It represents but a fraction of the research done in recent years, for example, into the operational aspects of the

invasions of Crete or France. The battle for mainland Greece in April 1941 thus remains somewhat of a historiographical 'gap'.

In place of serious and comprehensive study, a powerful set of myths and misconceptions have grown to dominate the English-language narrative of the Greek campaign. Initially, and understandably, many were derived from Allied wartime propaganda – 1941 was a period of extreme anxiety and desperation for Britain and the Dominions. It was not a time for cold and dispassionate analysis. An immediate interpretation of events in Greece was required that softened the blow, and helped explain away what was clearly a disaster. Significant mistruths also grew from self-serving post-campaign reports and immediate post-war memoirs from senior Allied officers present in Greece and conscious of the need to protect their professional reputations. After the war and for the next 70 years these types of distorted accounts – often accepted without question or critique – have informed the dominant English-language narrative. One of the most potent of the misconceptions about the Greek campaign still used to 'explain' the W Force defeat is the notion of a huge disparity in numbers against which gallant Allied troops could not compete. As the newspapers of the day recorded, 'In every battle in the 300 mile retreat our men fought against odds of three, four or five to one.'³ The general interpretation is that vastly outnumbered and largely isolated W Force detachments were only pushed from their defensive positions numerically superior Nazi hordes. If the defenders had only been able to fight on equal terms then the debacle in Greece outcome may well have been reversed. This key explanation of W Force's defeat, however, is wrong.

It is appropriate at this stage to provide samples of the establishment and evolution of this myth. Soon after the war the British government itself sponsored and published monographs concerning events in Greece. One of the more prominent lamented how W Force was 'too thin on the ground' and how much it was 'overmatched' by '... far more numerous German adversaries.'⁴ This type of pseudo-propaganda was soon built upon by a number of influential post-war memoirs and biographies. Lieutenant General H.M. Wilson, the officer in command of W Force, himself published an account of Greece which, unsurprisingly, reinforced the idea of a decisive German numerical advantage.⁵ The memoirs of Vice-Admiral H.T. Baillie-Grohman, who was intimately involved with the final British evacuation

from Greece, lamented how the defenders were 'beaten, not through lack of courage or skill', but because they 'did not possess the quality and quantity of arms with which to win.'⁶ Even John Connell's well-constructed 1964 biography of Field Marshal Archibald Wavell, British Commander-in-chief in the Middle East in 1941, reinforced the by now well-established orthodoxy that W Force reversals were a consequence of an '... immense numerical superiority' held by the Germans.⁷

The early orthodoxy of the idea of the decisiveness of superior German numbers was further established and reinforced by the British, New Zealand and Australian official histories of the campaign. The first of these to be published, I.S.O. Playfair's 1956 account of Britain's war in the Middle East, described the 'SS Adolf Hitler Division and the 9th Panzer Division' doing battle with an Australian brigade near Veve in northern Greece, the 6th Mountain and 2nd Panzer Divisions overwhelming another W Force brigade at the Pinios Gorge; and the 'German 72nd Division' making a 'night attack at Molos'.⁸ Here Playfair is misleading. At no time throughout the campaign in Greece did these German divisions ever fight as formations. He might have qualified such inferences by adding phrases such as 'reconnaissance elements from ...' or 'the leading elements of ...' Three years after Playfair's account of Greece was published, W.G. McClymont's official history of New Zealand's involvement was released. It too stressed 'the small Imperial force available' and contrasted it to 'the strength of the German army'.⁹ The Australian official history of the campaign, written by Gavin Long and published in 1962, did nothing to challenge this prevailing interpretation. For Long, W Force's defeat was a consequence of 'an enemy force stronger in both armour and infantry'.¹⁰ '[T]he most vital factor in their defeat of our troops in Greece' he noted 'was Germany's overwhelming superiority on the ground ... In the words of one senior officer, it was a case of one unarmoured man against six armoured men'.¹¹

Thirty years of consistent and unchallenged English-language tradition of framing W Force's defeat in Greece through the filter of numerical mismatch continued to shape the few books published in the 1970s that related to the campaign. A biography of Major General Iven Mackay, in command of the 6th Australian Division in Greece in 1975, for example, described in detail how 22 German divisions in the Balkans fought against 'a handful of ill-equipped Greek divisions, a New Zealand and an Australian division, and

a British brigade armoured group.¹² Mackay himself is quoted as claiming that ‘no general in his right mind would tackle them [the Germans] in open battle without guaranteed superiority – in the number of division but especially tanks’; yet numerical superiority, as will be demonstrated, was often on the Allied side in Greece.¹³

To take a wider perspective, more general studies of the Second World War from the 1970 onwards have continued to be influenced by the mistaken idea of W Force numerical disadvantage in Greece. A.J.P. Taylor described the campaign as ‘... pursued with inadequate means’.¹⁴ John Keegan wrote that the defenders, ‘lacked the numbers and equipment to resist the Germans’ as ‘three British divisions and six Greek divisions spared from the Albanian front had battled against eighteen of the enemy...’¹⁵ This never happened. Other more recent and specialised work has tended to continue the tradition. Douglas Porch’s comprehensive volume on the Mediterranean theatre in the Second World War published in 2005, for example, refers to a ‘looming [but not actual] German avalanche’ in Greece, and how W Force ‘faced 13 divisions bearing down on the Aliakmon line’ – an enormous number of troops which, of course, never came close to reaching this Allied position before it was abandoned.¹⁶

Some of the most conspicuous contemporary champions of the myth that W Force was pushed out of Greece by superior German numbers are more ‘populist’ accounts of the campaign, particularly those published in Australia. In 2008 *Forgotten Anzacs*, for example, was released describing how W Force had ‘attempted to hold the mightiest military force the world had ever seen’.¹⁷ Nowhere, apparently, had British and Dominion troops ‘faced longer odds’ than in Greece.¹⁸ In another account, published only last year, in one particular action a W Force brigade was described as doing battle with ‘four German divisions on their own’ – a gross overestimation of the number of German troops present at the engagement in question.¹⁹ A subsequent description of an action fought at Brallos Pass similarly describes a defending W Force brigade as ‘holding off the German 6th Mountain Division’.²⁰ It most certainly did not. Small leading elements of this German division were present, but this is entirely different from the inference that the whole formation fought at Brallos.

Certainly, for those who were present in Greece in 1941 and for writers interested in celebrating or commemorating their efforts, there is much

to recommend the notion of enormous German numerical superiority in this campaign. Under this blanket explanation little blame can be attached to the defeated British and Dominion force. The force faced grossly mismatched numerical odds and had no choice but to retire down the Greek peninsula, then evacuate, due to sheer weight of German numbers. But it is not true. This idea, as convenient as it might have been at the time and as comfortable as it has no doubt been for many authors since, informs a mistaken historical interpretation of the campaign. The overall 'truth' in Greece, and the central argument of this article, is that at the *point of contact* between defending W Force troops and the attackers most often it was the *Germans that were outnumbered*.

The first phase of the German invasion of Greece as it unfolded did not actually involve W Force. Rather, the initial German attacks launched from across the Bulgarian frontier, mounted in conjunction with simultaneous thrusts into southern Yugoslavia, were aimed at breaking the undermanned Greek defences of the Metaxas Line – a 155 kilometre long chain of fortifications constructed along the line of the Greco-Bulgarian border and named after the former Greek dictator. The first time Imperial troops faced the Germans in battle was in a short and intense engagement fought at Kleidi Pass, near the village of Vevi, between 12-13 April. This action resulted from an early and serious Yugoslav collapse in southern Serbia which exposed northern Greece to invasion along the axis of the 'Monastir Gap' – a valley running from Monastir in the north to the Greek city of Florina, 13 kilometres south of the Yugoslavian border. As a consequence of events in southern Yugoslavia, German troops were soon streaming down this passage, threatening to flank the W Force line to the east. In response the 19th Australian Brigade, along with flanking Greek formations, was rushed northwards to plug the gap at Kleidi. The ensuing battle was a clear German victory. By the evening of 13 April the forward elements of *Leibstandarte* SS Adolf Hitler Regiment, followed by vanguard elements of the 9th Panzer Division, were through the Kleidi Pass and were headed south. The defenders were mauled but nonetheless managed to escape in what was best described as a less than an orderly withdrawal south. German numbers, however, (much like German armour which was not actually present at the battle until the rout had begun) cannot be said to have been decisive.²¹

Put plainly, the traditional idea that 'the defending force available [at Kleidi Pass] was not adequate by the time the German push came' and that 'the enemy was far too strong to be held for any length of time by the troops available to us' – that the defenders could do nothing in the face of overwhelming German numbers – is untrue.²² The German force which was actually in combat with the defenders on 12 April was numerically inferior. The *Leibstandarte* SS Adolf Hitler Regiment attacked with two reinforced battalion groups. Only one of these (the Witt Group of six infantry companies) was directed at the Kleidi Pass itself. The other (the Weidenhaupt Group also of six infantry companies) was directed to the east against the villages of Kelli and Petres, and through remnants of the withdrawing Greek Dodecanese Regiment's position. The third German battle group, the Appel Group from the 9th Panzer Division, operated to the left of Kleidi Pass and had a negligible bearing on the outcome of the battle. The 19th Australian Brigade defended Kleidi Pass and either side of it with a brigade group of three battalions, an anti-tank battalion, half of a machine gun battalion, two field artillery regiments and a medium artillery regiment. Thus the Witt Group's one and a half battalions attacked three defending battalions at this key point. It is likely that during their advance the right hand elements of Weidenhaupt Group made contact with the right flank of the 2/8th Australian Battalion. Even so, however, this only raised the ratio to perhaps two attacking battalions against three defending battalions. The key Kleidi Pass road position was penetrated by the equivalent of three companies from Witt Group at a maximum. The uncomfortable truth is that the Allies were shifted from their line at Kleidi by a considerably numerically *inferior* force.²³

Following the action at Kleidi Pass, W Force waited anxiously as the leading German troops closed up to and began to probe a series of defended passes along the Aliakmon Line, while plans were hurriedly developed to withdraw much further south to a new line at Thermopylae. Importantly, skirmishes across the W Force line during this period represented rearguard efforts to slow, not to stop the German advance. Sharp engagements like that in the vicinity of Katerini, for example, by the New Zealand Cavalry Regiment, were designed to delay, not to prevent, the German advance over the Aliakmon River in that sector. So too, actions at the Servia and the Olympus Passes (and at Plantamon) were all undertaken within the context of a looming withdrawal to the Thermopylae Line. Invariably, the

defenders in these localities were instructed to hold only for so long as a withdrawal could be arranged. Further west, as the British armoured brigade was moving progressively south, one troop commander noted: 'I've been a rearguard or a road block for two days and two nights, and I haven't seen or heard a German...'.²⁴ He went on to ask, 'what the devil are we running away from?'²⁵ Across the W Force front, according to the German 2nd Panzer Division, the enemy 'has not yet ventured to fight.'²⁶ Within the framework of an overall effort by W Force to delay the German advance rather than to halt it, it is possible to continue to track the theme of decisively superior numbers at the point of battle.

On 16 April the Germans put in a number of attacks put in against the 5th New Zealand Brigade at the Olympus Pass. These were, however, primarily conducted by two infantry companies (against the 28th (Maori) Battalion) and two companies of cyclists (against the 22nd New Zealand Battalion). There was no numerical advantage to the attackers here. In fact, the only sector in which the Germans were able to bring superior weight of numbers and firepower against the W Force line during this phase was on the eastern flank at Plantamon. Here, the 21st New Zealand Battalion was progressively forced from its position by the equivalent of two German battalions supported by armour. To return to context, however, in this sector the defenders did not choose to stay and fight. Rather, after sustaining a meagre 35 casualties, and against the instructions and the clear intent passed earlier to him by Freyberg, the New Zealand battalion commander withdrew before his unit was decisively committed. It is this choice, and subsequent events on this crucial right hand flank of the W Force Line in the vicinity of Pinios Gorge, which would decide much of how the remainder of the campaign unfolded.²⁷

There is no question that taken in overall terms events in the vicinity of Pinios Gorge between 17-18 April were critical. The chances of W Force successfully withdrawing to the Thermopylae Line were in many ways reliant on the staying power of the hastily deployed brigade sent to the area with orders to hold out until the morning of 19 April, after which time threat to the bottle-neck at Larissa would have passed and a potentially disastrous situation would have been saved. At the same time, the opportunity to crack the defenders in this location, and thus cut-off a large proportion of W Force while it was moving south through Larissa represented a signifi-

cant opportunity for the Germans. A German attack was mounted in this sector over the period 17-18 April and, although successful in routing the defenders, the composite Australian and New Zealand brigade in this area nonetheless managed to hold on for sufficient time to protect Larissa – if only by the skin of its teeth.

Again, the idea that W Force troops at Pinios Gorge were pushed from their positions by vastly superior German numbers is a premise that underpins many English-language accounts of the engagement, especially those written in Australia. In this regard they echo the press reports of the time which claimed the Australians and New Zealanders in this battle participated in distinctly ‘unequal combat’, in that they ‘held up two divisions, which outnumbered them by a least ten to one.’²⁸ This perception was also present in the minds of W Force soldiers stationed elsewhere and still yet to meet a German attack. A soldier from the 2/6th Australian Battalion, for example, noted with bitterness in his diary after the battle at Pinios that ‘no doubt the Hun is well-equipped in everything as well as numbers.’²⁹ Such contentions are, of course, nonsense. The defending brigade group at the Pinios Gorge faced attack by *elements* of two German divisions, but it certainly did not fight them *as* divisions. In fact, the 21st New Zealand Battalion was assaulted, in the morning of 18 April, by 6-9 German tanks, around two companies of troops from 112th Reconnaissance Unit firing from across the gorge, a small detachment of infantrymen from 8/800th Special Unit, and small patrols from the 7th Battalion, 304th Regiment which had managed to cross to the south bank of the Pinios River. This force increased as the afternoon approached, but by this stage the 21st New Zealand Battalion was in the process of withdrawing from the field. When account is taken of the anti-tank support available to this battalion, the force that routed the New Zealanders was roughly equivalent to their own.³⁰

Similarly, on the western flank of the defenders’ position, the 2/2nd Australian Battalion was attacked from the west during the morning of 18 April by a single German battalion (the 3rd Battalion, 143rd Regiment), less a company despatched to perform an ambushing task in depth. This attack was covered by a feint by the 1st Battalion, 143rd Regiment. Even conceding that in the afternoon the Australians were under fire from some elements of a German infantry/armoured emerging from the gorge, and faced an attack by the 1st Battalion, 143rd Regiment when it eventually moved against

the village of Evangelismos, the actual numbers of troops engaging each other on the ground on this flank does not give much of a numerical advantage to the Germans. Certainly, in both instances, had the defenders held for longer, then the Germans would have been free to concentrate an ever increasing force against them – but such a concentration proved to be unnecessary. The engagement at Pinios Gorge, as it eventuated as opposed to how it might have developed, was fought between roughly equivalent ground forces. The story was the same in terms of artillery. The German attack was only effectively supported by the 1st Battalion, 118th Mountain Artillery Regiment, which was low on ammunition and could deliver only 400 rounds all day on 18 April. The 1st Battalion, 95th Mountain Artillery Regiment only arrived on the scene at 3.00pm, too late to be effective as German forces were already advancing on the south side of the Pinios. Against this the 4th (NZ) Field Regiment supported the defenders throughout.³¹

Following its narrow escape through Larissa, the period 19-24 April was marked by three key developments for W Force – the ongoing withdrawal and occupation of the Thermopylae Line, the capitulation of the Greek Albanian armies, and a continuing planning for the evacuation of W force from Greece. In a very important way the period represented a period of ‘success’ for W Force in that it manned, consolidated and held the Thermopylae Line long enough to facilitate the beginning of the evacuation. In the process the 19th Australian and 6th NZ Brigades, in particular, managed to delay the German advance sufficiently, and at the same withdraw skilfully enough to escape German clutches and slip away without significant casualties. The W Force line at Thermopylae was thus unbroken, proclaimed the press in Britain and the Dominions, thanks to the ‘earnest resolution and the Anzac spirit’.³² But in these types of quotes lies the essence of the problem of historical misinterpretation of Greece. W Force delaying operations at Thermopylae were a success – but as was the case throughout the campaign in no way was this a case of stout-hearted defence against overwhelming waves of Germans held together by the ‘mateship’ of trans-Tasman allies. The real explanation was much more prosaic.

The first reason why the Thermopylae Line stood long enough to begin effecting the W Force evacuation from Greece was the difficult and sluggish German concentration of force in the vicinity of Lamia to the immediate north. A single axis of advance for two armoured divisions and a moun-

tain division caused monumental traffic control problems that were never rectified. Congested roads and Allied demolitions combined to ensure that a grand total of only one company of German tanks were available to pressure the W Force line at Thermopylae before its scheduled withdrawal. Major General H. von Greiffenberg, Chief of Staff of the 12th Army, considered that the destruction of road bottle-necks and bridges north of Thermopylae was 'most effective' in delaying a pursuit.³³ Major L. Glonbik, an intelligence officer on the 12th Army's headquarters, agreed that such demolitions caused a lamentable 'delay in operations.'³⁴ Had it not been for such demolitions, topography, or the underdeveloped state of Greek roads north of Thermopylae, then the W Force line would have been smashed by superior numbers with little concern over the defensive power of the Anzac spirit. Such numbers, however, never arrived. Moreover, if any branch of W Force contributed to this delay it was not the infantrymen of the two forward brigades, but the accurate and intensive Allied artillery fire applied to the vicinity of Lamia throughout this period. The fact that W Force was evacuating and that such guns were therefore to be destroyed in place helped in this regard as all could be manned until the last moment by skeleton crews. Had the corps been withdrawing to another defensive line then the artillery would have been required to depart much earlier than it did, and again the result would likely have been different.³⁵

The reality was that as had been the case at Pinios Gorge, most of the pressure applied against Brallos and the Thermopylae Passes of the Thermopylae Line was from a small number of dismounted German infantrymen, most of whom had already undertaken exhausting marches with restricted supplies even to get to the Thermopylae Line. The fact that such light forces were used against the Allied line was a consequence of the delay in getting heavy forces forward already noted, and of German doctrine which encouraged quick attacks of the line of march by light screening forces. What this meant, in effect, was once again the Germans mounted a series of attacks in an ad hoc and impromptu fashion that put them at a numerical *disadvantage*. At Brallos the four battalions of the 19th Australian Brigade were attacked by small detachments from three German infantry battalions within the Jais Group (55th Motorcycle Battalion, and the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 141st Mountain Regiment). At Molos the 24 companies of the 6th New Zealand Brigade were assaulted initially only by two companies

of infantrymen (9th and 11th Companies, 3rd Battalion, 124th Regiment) and a troop of tanks. This was followed a little later by a second unsuccessful German attack using the same two companies and a company of tanks. In the final attack against the NZ position at 6.00pm the Germans threw four infantry companies (with the addition of two from the 112th Reconnaissance Unit) against the defenders.³⁶ The balance of forces equation was still clearly against the attackers here. Furthermore, the medium regiment (less one troop), four field regiments, two anti-tank regiments and a light anti-aircraft battery available to the New Zealanders dwarfed the limited amount of artillery the Germans could press forward in this sector throughout the day. Had German artillery been massed in the Styliis area, 12km from Molos and taken on 21 April, then this imbalance would not have existed. The opportunity, however, was missed. The balance of force equation alone might have predicted the outcome – and it was a balance firmly in favour of the defenders.³⁷

The only significant engagement between W Force and German troops in which the latter had any real numerical advantage occurred on 26 April when an airborne attack was launched to capture the bridge over the Corinth Canal in order to cut off the continuing W Force withdrawal into the Peloponnese. The attack, despite the loss of the bridge which was destroyed in the skirmishing that followed the German descent, was a success. The W Force effort to defend the Corinth sector was uncoordinated and ineffective. In truth, had the Germans launched this airborne assault even 48 hours earlier then the consequences for W Force would have been catastrophic. Trapped in the vicinity of Athens and blocked from using the southern Peloponnese beaches British evacuation plans would have been destroyed. By 26 April, however, the operation was mounted too late to seriously interrupt the ongoing British and Dominion evacuations – although it did lead to a few moments of serious concern for the 4th New Zealand Brigade before it was withdrawn from the Athens beaches. The German attack on Corinth was mounted by two battalions of 2nd Parachute Regiment, 1st Parachute Division, reinforced by a parachute medical company and engineer troop. Opposing this force was a thin line of defenders in the area which included a detachment from the 4th Hussars and the three rifle companies from the 19th NZ and the 2/6th Australian Battalions already dug in. These troops were supported by a squadron of the NZ cavalry regiment and two carrier

platoons from the 22nd New Zealand and 28th (Maori) Battalions.³⁸ Importantly, the numerical mismatch at Corinth, although coming down in favour of the attackers, was not very large, and it by no means accounted for the ease of German success in this operation or the frail inadequacy of the W Force defensive effort at Corinth which was immediately and completely overwhelmed.³⁹

In overall terms the ensuing W Force evacuation from Greece was unquestionably a success. Around 50 000 men were taken from Greece with 12 000 more lost – mostly as prisoners – two thirds of which were taken at Kalamata before they could be shipped to Alexandria or the relative safety of Crete. This was a significant achievement for increasingly desperate W Force planners and the Royal Navy. The final numbers salvaged from Greece were far in excess of initial predictions by senior British officers that a third of the force deployed would be lucky to escape. In regards to the question of numerical mismatches the W Force disaster at Kalamata warrants particular attention. Here, during 28 April around 8000 troops were still stranded and it was towards this mass that the continuing German thrust into the Peloponnese was aimed. During the morning W Force troops were arranged in groups for embarkation that night. Meanwhile, continuing *Luftwaffe* air raids, mostly strafing runs by Me. 109s, saw casualties mounting. Orders for the evacuation tasked the New Zealand 'Reinforcement Battalion' troops with defending the northern approach to town while the armed Australian sub-units were to be held as a reserve. From 6.00pm the waiting columns were to assemble and begin move to quay, which was to be guarded by an armed 50 man detachment posted to prevent embarkations out of order. A small two-squadron screen further to the north of the town from the 4th Hussars, the last elements scheduled to depart, was to withdraw at 12.30am towards the quay. Armed fighting troops were to be evacuated first, with labourers and Yugoslavian military refugees the last to leave.⁴⁰

At 4.00pm, 28 April, the Hussars screen reported no Germans within 40km of the beach. Shortly thereafter, however, a German column appeared and engaged the Hussars astride the road to Kalamata. A short action broke out, the Hussars disintegrated and the Germans pressed on. Two hours later, at 6.00pm, as W Force troops at Kalamata began organising themselves in preparation before moving down the beach, a reinforced German com-

pany, having earlier burst through the Hussar screen, drove into Kalamata. Meeting no opposition, as most W Force troops were gathered east of town, the German company took scattered prisoners and pressed on to the harbour where it drew up near a customs house. There the Germans guarded their prisoners and began to probe eastwards along the waterfront. As no serious fighting had yet developed more Allied soldiers were surprised and captured, including a Royal Navy beach-master with his signaller, whose task was to have been to coordinate the planned embarkation. Two German field guns were set up on the wharf and began to shell the W Force dispersal areas. German machine guns and mortars soon added their weight of fire.⁴¹ The Germans were, from this point, progressively attacked by bands of semi-organised British, Australian and New Zealand troops in the Kalamata area. Finally, surrounded, hard pressed, with severe casualties, and out of ammunition, the remaining Germans surrendered at around 9.30pm. They were disarmed and their weapons thrown into the sea. The German company group had taken 101 casualties, including 41 killed.⁴² Crucially, the process of fighting on the Kalamata waterfront had encouraged the naval task force scheduled to conduct the evacuation from Kalamata, to abandon the operation. Close to 8000 W Force troops were subsequently surrendered by their commander, although a small proportion chose to flee into the countryside rather than to walk quietly into captivity. There is no question that a range of factors and circumstances contributed to this disaster for W Force at Kalamata – and it is beyond this investigation to explore them. The noteworthy point here, however, in regards to numerical mismatches, was the impact at Kalamata of around 150 German infantrymen – outnumbered by more than fifty to one.

In conclusion, the idea of W Force facing insurmountable numerical odds in Greece in 1941 remains an enduring and powerful theme. This mistaken mantra began early as a way to help conveniently explain away the speed and scale of Allied defeat. Throughout May 1941, as the Dominion press in particular began dissecting the failure of W Force, this ‘acceptable’ explanation found traction. In Australia the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the Anzac Corps as ‘[t]he Davids of the Southern Cross’, who ‘fought in Greece against the German Goliath.’⁴³ W Force was just ‘too small to hold the weight of military power that Germany had been able to assemble.’⁴⁴ Such sentiments were echoed by high profile politicians such as An-

thony Eden who told the Greeks by radio in early May that: 'You have been overcome by overwhelming superiority of numbers...you have not been defeated.'⁴⁵ He was, of course, wildly mistaken on both counts. Churchill himself erroneously noted that 'on several occasions, sometimes for two days at a time', the Germans 'were brought to a standstill by forces one fifth of their number...'⁴⁶ The myth also suited Allied generals looking to deflect awkward questions and inferences about the campaign. 'The truth is', wrote Mackay in June 1941, 'that the force of two divisions for which for various reasons the Anzac Corps was limited was never sufficiently numerous.'⁴⁷ Certainly this idea permeated throughout all ranks of W Force, especially once the campaign was over. 'We were at all times hopelessly outnumbered', lamented an officer of the 2/1st Australian Battalion.⁴⁸

On the surface, a simple contrast between the 12th Army and W Force orders of battle seems to bear out the idea of German decisive numerical superiority. After all, on 28 April, the last night of organised W Force evacuation, five of the 12th Army's 14 divisions were south of the plain of Thessaly and 10 were in Greece – not to mention the German 2nd Army stationed to the north which could also have been deployed in Greece had there been a need. It was also true, per se, that W Force's two infantry divisions and its armoured brigade fought, at various times in the campaign, three panzer divisions (2nd, 5th, and 9th), two mountain divisions (5th and 6th) the 72nd Infantry Division, the *Leibstandarte* SS Adolf Hitler Regiment, and the 1st Parachute Division. This seems quite a disparity – until, that is, the nature of the fighting that actually took place is analysed. W Force, in fact, did not fight *any* of these divisions in the sense implied by those seeking to build a case for German numerical superiority. Its rearguard elements fought advance guards from these formations. At no time was a significant proportion of any German division in battle against W Force. As has been demonstrated, at the point of contact, the only place where relative numbers counted, more often than not W Force units outnumbered their attackers. A paper count of divisions shows a clear German advantage, but it was never realised on the ground. At no point can W Force claim overwhelming German numbers pushed it unwillingly out of Greece.⁴⁹ Current and future historians need to 'unsubscribe' to such an idea.

Notes

- 1 Some examples of works that do devote significant attention to operational events include: J. Bitzes, *Greece in World War II, to April 1941*, Sunflower University Press, Manhattan, 1989; A. Terzakes & D. Connolly, *The Greek Epic, 1940-1941*, Greek Army Press, Athens, 1990; C. Polyziou, *The Allied Campaign Corps in Greece (March – May 1941)*, Hellenic Army General Staff History Directorate, Athens, 1991; Anon., *An Abridged History of the Greek-Italian and Greek-German War, 1940-1941*, Hellenic Army General Staff History Directorate, Athens, 1997; & M. Willingham, *Perilous Commitments: The Battle for Greece and Crete 1940-1941*, Spellmount, Staplehurst, 2005. Some of the more analytical articles in question include: R. Hobson, 'The Episode in Greece', *Army Quarterly & Defence Journal*, Vol. 120, No. 2, 1990, pp.152-166; J. Sadkovich, 'Italian Morale During the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941', *War and Society*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1994, pp.97-123; & J. Sadkovich, 'Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941', *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 58, No. 4, pp.617-642.
- 2 See, for example, W. Phillips, *The Middle East Campaigns of 1940-1942: Greece and Crete*, Phillips Publications, Coffs Harbour, 2000; & P. Ewer, *The Forgotten Anzacs: The campaign in Greece, 1941*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2008.
- 3 'Ordeal of Anzacs', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 May 1941, Australian War Memorial (AWM) Series PR 88, Item 72.
- 4 C. Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, HMSO, London, 1952, pp. 138 & 140-41.
- 5 H. Wilson, *Eight Years Overseas 1939-1947*, Hutchinson & Co., London, 1949.
- 6 A. Heckstall-Smith, & H.T. Baillie-Grohman, *Greek tragedy, 1941*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1961, p. 225.
- 7 J. Connell, *Wavell, Soldier and Scholar*, Collins, London, 1964, pp. 411 & 420.
- 8 I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. 2, HMSO, London, 1956, pp. 88, 90 & 99.
- 9 W.G. McClymont, *To Greece*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1959, pp. 471 & 478.
- 10 G. Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, p. 196.
- 11 Letter, Long to Anonymous, AWM PR88/72, 3/18.
- 12 I. Chapman, *Iven G. Mackay: Citizen and Soldier*, Melway Publishing, Melbourne, 1975, pp. 217-18
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 234.
- 14 A.J.P. Taylor, *The Second World War: an illustrated history*, Penguin, London, 1975, pp. 89-90.
- 15 J. Keegan, *The Second World War*, Viking, New York, 1990, pp. 157 & 158.
- 16 D. Porch, *Hitler's Mediterranean Gamble: the North African and the Mediterranean Campaigns in World War II*, Cassell, London, 2005, pp. 141 & 154.
- 17 *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
- 18 P. Ewer, *Forgotten Anzacs*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2008, p. 206.
- 19 M. Hill, *Diggers and Greeks: the Australian campaigns in Greece and Crete*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010, p. 105.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 119.
- 21 '1st Armoured Brigade Group notes on operations in Greece, April, 1941', 8 May 1941, The National Archives (UK) (TNA), Series WO 201, Item 2749.
- 22 'A summary of the participation of the A.I.F. in the Lustreforce Expedition in Greece March-April, 1941' AWM 54, 534/5/7.

- 23 'Detailed comment upon draft of Mr. Buckley's popular history of the Greek Campaign', B. Freyberg, AWM 67, 5/17; Letter, Freyberg to Kippenberger, 16 January 1950, AWM 67 5/17; & 'Notes on English methods of fighting (Greece)', AWM 54, 534/2/27.
- 24 R. Crisp, *The gods were neutral*, White Lion, London, 1975, p. 157.
- 25 *ibid.*
- 26 'Appendices to 2 Pz Div Admin Diary (Greek Campaign)', AWM 54, 534/2/27.
- 27 'The campaign in Greece, April 1941', Brigadier S.F. Rowell, 6 June 1941, AWM 3DRL 6763(A), [1-4]; & Comments by W.E. Murphy, NZ War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, January 1950. AWM 67, 5/17.
- 28 'Epic withdrawal from Greece', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 May 1941, AWM PR 88/72.
- 29 Diary Extracts from Private F.J. Gorman, 2/6 Battalion, AWM PR85/250.
- 30 'The public reaction to the Greek campaign', compiled by Gavin Long, AWM 3DRL 8052/109.
- 31 '6 Mtn Div battle reports (Greek campaign)', AWM 54, 534/2/27
- 32 'Future of forces in Greece', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 April 1941, AWM PR 88/72.
- 33 'Answers to a questionnaire given by the Australian Historical Section', General H. von Greiffenberg, 4 July 1947, AWM 67, 624/7/2.
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- 36 The 9th & 11th (cycle) Companies and the 12th Machine Gun Company from the 3rd Battalion, 124th Regiment; the cycle squadron from the 72nd Division and the cycle and cavalry squadrons from the 112th Reconnaissance Unit.
- 37 'Extracts from 6 Mtn Div War Diary (Greece and Crete)'. AWM 54, 534/2/27; 'Extracts from 72 Inf Div War Diary (Greek Campaign)'. AWM 54, 534/2/27; 'The campaign in Greece, April 1941', Brigadier S.F. Rowell, 6 June 1941. AWM 3DRL 6763(A), [1-4]; & 'Extracts from morning reports to 12th Army to GHQ (Greece & Crete)', AWM 67, 5/17.
- 38 'Report on anti-parachute operations by Officer Commanding "B" Coy, 2/6 Bn - Corinth Canal Area 25/26 Apr. 41.', AWM 54, 534/2/35 [2]; Narrative of Captain H.A. Dean, 2/6 Battalion, 5 July 1945. AWM 54, 234/2/16; Letter, Lieutenant Colonel G.F. Smith to Army Headquarters, 23 June 1953, AWM 119, 397; & Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, pp. 165-66.
- 39 Headquarters BTE War Diary, 8 April 1941, TNA WO 169/994B; 'Probable German tactics in Greece', 25 March 1941. TNA WO 201/19; Force Operation Instruction No. 16, 25 April 1941, TNA WO 201/53; 'Report of conversation between General Papagos and Mr. Watt', 24 March 1941, TNA WO 201/51; Force Operation Instruction No. 16, 25 April 1941. AWM 54, 534/2/26 [Part 3]; & G.E. Blau, *Invasion Balkans! The German Campaign in the Balkans, Spring 1941*, Burd Street Press, Shippensburg, 1997, p. 104.
- 40 'Report on attachment to Brig Allen', AWM 3DRL6850, 108.
- 41 Memoir, 'Campaign - Greece 1941', Imperial War Museum (IWM), Papers of Lieutenant Colonel C.M.L. Clements, 98/21/1; Report by Captain A.W. Gray, 11 July 1945, AWM 54, 534/2/1; & Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 180.
- 42 Report by Captain A.W. Gray, 11 July 1945, AWM 54, 534/2/1; Report by Private J.J. Woodward, 6 November 1945, AWM 54, 534/2/13; Letter, Woodhill o Allen, 4 May 1941, AWM 54, 534/6/1; 'Greece 1941: Diary of 81. Adv. Base Sub Area with Addenda, Brigadier L. Parrington', IWM, 76/118/2; McClymont, *To Greece*, pp. 457-460; & Heckstall-Smith & Baillie-Grohman, *Greek Tragedy*, p. 201.
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History

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