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Dear Sir,

I have thoroughly enjoyed the spirited correspondence which has appeared in the Defence Force Journal over the past twelve months. Controversial articles such as Lieutenant Bailey's "Medium Power Air Force-What Need To Exist" (DFJ Number 83) generate equally controversial discussion which in turn has obviously enlarged the reader population of the DFJ. It is also clear from the content of some letters that personal interpretation of history is as varied as the Pacific Ocean is wide! I do not intend to argue any further toses about past battles but wish to clarify a number of issues raised by Squadron Leader K.W. Rushworth (Letters ADFJ No. 85).

A true defence strategy must be founded upon careful assessment of a nation's vulnerabilities rather than threats. For example, the structure of NATO had been for many years determined by the perennial threat of the Warsaw Pact. Recent events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have occurred over a very short span of history and are irrefutable proof that threats can be here one day, gone the next. Therefore if one's vulnerabilities are examined and acted upon it is reasonable to assume the likelihood of any future threats will be more adequately handled and a nation better prepared.

Australia, as SQN LDR Rushworth points out is "surrounded by water", presents a "large country to defend with extremely limited monetary and human resources" and is "immensely rich in mineral, food and area resources". Australia is also extremely dependent on foreign trade. Every trade deficit figure in living memory has shown that cost of Australia's reliance on imports is far greater than our earnings from exports. As a commodity based economy with very limited manufacturing industry and capacity we will be very reliant on imported goods for a considerable time to come. Proof of this statement is available to us all by lifting every item on our dinner tables or our desks and seeing where it was made or grown or canned or packaged. The medium of transport for these goods is the sea. Australia is the world's fifth largest user of shipping to transport 94% of its import and export trade. We are very dependent on the sea lanes of communication whether to and from overseas marketplaces or coastal trade. The can of baked beans, the 'Coco Pops', the petrol is mostly transported by coastal vessels. It follows that Australia is a maritime nation.

With this firmly in mind, a strategy addressing our vulnerabilities should be expanded from a nucleus of keeping these maritime communication lines open. Tantamount to this task is ensuring that occurrences and imports we don't need are also kept in check e.g. Economic Zone incursions and violations, infringement of national health, immigration, customs, and quarantine laws. Australia is very vulnerable economically and even a substantially less well armed adversary could seriously disrupt our lifestyle without firing a shot. Australia's shipping may even be a target of opportunity as an unwittingly involved party in a conflict between other nations: an Australian registered merchant vessel was attacked in the Persian Gulf in 1987. This action delayed a number of similar 'deliveries' to Australia with subsequent rationing occurring in Australia in a very short time. What level of lost revenue or imports could Australia and its economy sustain?

Maritime components of the ADF at present (FHIC, P3C, Oberon Submarines) are unquestionably the most potent weapons in our region and give Australia the capability to project well beyond our shores. As defined in the Defence White Paper they provide Type 1 deterrence: as such their part in the Defence equation is vital. Assets such as the F/A18 are also important in the worst case scenario should an exuberant aggressor eventually venture onto our mainland. However, what ADF assets are there to adequately cover the 'middle ground'; the area between 'all out' military response and the simple expression of a nation's right of innocent passage on the high seas and to keep sea lanes of communication open. Such assets should have the ability to be offensive at one end of the spectrum during hostilities. Conversely, these assets should possess the ability to be totally passive and project a credible naval presence in the interests of preserving peace.

A carrier or air capable platform is such an asset. SQN LDR Rushworth exploits the hackneyed fallacies that a carrier is only about a "capability to project power", "massive offensive power projection" and must be big enough to have two McDonalds franchises aboard to be viable. As stated, projection is one of the carrier's functions...
but by no means its only function. The level of projection is directly proportional to the potential of the owner. In our region, any fixed wing air capable platform would be a peacetime expression of our willingness to preserve peace, and in wartime offer us the option of baring teeth as an independent, self-reliant nation: a worthy friend or a willing foe. Furthermore, a carrier makes no territorial demands while providing a demonstration of commitment, and resolve, in both peace and war. Carriers do not need to be of biblical dimensions. Newly commissioned air capable platforms in the UK, Italy and Spain are small, well defended, fast vessels capable of providing credible ability to defend and protect their interests on the high seas. When operated in a sensibly layered defence tactic, a carrier task force is not an easily or cursorily dismissed force.

The issue of vulnerability is always raised in this argument. Any defence asset is vulnerable during conflict. All military hardware and facilities have an Achilles heel; aircraft and airfields are open to sabotage, missile or bomb attack, a harbour is open to mining and so on. As a Defence Force we should not be in the business of being frightened to use, and if necessary, lose any asset if the stakes are sufficiently high. The absence of a credible naval presence without any integral air defence denies Australia the option of handling any future conflicts in the neutrality of open ocean thereby forcing the conflict onto our shore. In peacetime, no credible self-defensive naval presence beyond our immediate coastline denies us a major capability to peacefully keep sea lanes open. This is an extremely limiting vulnerability.

Finally, on the issue of an air capable platform for Australia, the best attribute we can hope for when purchasing any capital equipment is the investment of our limited monetary resources in assets which are as useful in peace as they are in war. Equipment which is only usable in the ultimate level of response, except that which is specifically Type One deterrence, is a very costly burden. However, consider the use of the carrier in the case of Cyclone Tracy? What flexibility would a carrier have given Australia in the event of the evacuation of foreign nationals from Fiji or Bougainville? In the current international tensions would a carrier not have offered Australia far greater options and levels of participation in the Gulf as an independent, self-reliant member nation of the United Nations rather than only as a component of United States Carrier Battle Group?

SQN LDR Rushworth states Defence White Paper guidance requires primarily ‘Island Defence’ as the ADF’s primary objective. This incorrect statement is the basis for argument on three occasions in his letter. The quoted policy document’s first page of text succinctly defines the first aim of defence as a three component equation:

“The first aim of defence self-reliance is to give Australia the military capability to prevent an aggressor attacking us successfully in our sea and air approaches, gaining a foothold on any part of our territory, or extracting concessions from Australia through the use or threat of military force”.

It then categorically states that “this wider concept of self-reliance rejects the narrow concept of ‘continental’ defence”. The flexibility of a carrier dovetails quite comfortably it seems with the first aim of the Defence of Australia.

By way of rebuttal Mr. Editor, I would like to briefly address a couple of SQN LDR Rushworth’s observations/statements. I was fortunate to have served in HMAS Melbourne for her two final overseas deployments. My recollections are of a World War II technology ship operating aircraft not much newer than herself. For this reason, there had been a long standing recognised and documented requirement to replace the ship and ultimately her aircraft. SQN LDR Rushworth’s ‘logic’ when dismissing the worth a concept by exploiting the defensive deficiencies of such an old ship and her aircraft compared to the modern equipment available is quite irrational. Notwithstanding the age of the vessel, the RAN operated her as effectively and safely as was humanly possible. By the time she was decommissioned, HMAS Melbourne had achieved one of the best carrier safety records in the world; sixteen years free of fatal incident. Her operational limitations were a function of her age but most certainly not degraded to “day VMC capability in good weather”: the blatant untruth of this statement can be easily proven by reference to a good number of personal flying log books and official returns of flying effort.

SQN LDR Rushworth boasts a “grasp of the true concept of carrier organic airpower” yet displays a clear ignorance of maritime layered defence, barrier and screening operations in the defence of high value units such as carriers, freighters, amphibious vessels et al. Any understanding of such concepts would have discouraged remarks such as “the ship was fight centre”. Similarly, this ignorance must also lay claim to the observation that “the USN does not have the capability to defend the mainland of the USA against concentrated air attacks ...” As already
discussed, the function of the seaborne airpower is to keep the battle away from the homeland.

SQN LDR Rushworth and I agree on one issue: in the past there has not been "enough honest discussion". Unfortunately, I include a good deal of his observations about the RAN, HMAS Melbourne, and the Fleet Air Arm as one more discussion lacking a good deal of clear and logical dissemination of fact. Similarly, his reasoning on the worth of an air capable platform for a maritime nation such as Australia lacks strategic and conceptual perspective and depth. It is extremely irresponsible not to accept the distinct difference between not being able to afford an item of equipment in the short term and categorically discounting its worth within a nation's strategic posture.

V.E.B Di Pietro
Lieutenant Commander, RAN

Dear Sir,

I note with interest the article by Lt Bailey titled 'The Medium Power Air Force' has generated a lively response. Having listened to much discussion on the topic and read the many letters to the Editor, I feel compelled to add to the comments already made.

My thesis for a defence organization such as the ADF to be effective is that all servicemen, servicewomen and Defence civilians must work together toward a common goal regardless of which service or department they belong to. We should not be arguing in a single service parochial sense but, rather, we should all strive to support the ADF to meet the mission assigned to CDF by the Government. This is particularly true when we use joint operations to meet defence contingencies.

To my mind, it does not matter too much which service maintains particular assets. Having said that, I believe we are obliged to recognize the need to be cost efficient out of responsibility to our tax payers. After experience with my sister services and having closely observed the Canadian experiment, as well as other allied services, I firmly hold to the opinion that the best balance between operational effectiveness, readiness and cost efficiency is obtained when asset responsibilities are fundamentally divided by the three elements: air, land and sea.

While the RAAF was guilty in the past of some parochial misjudgment of priorities, particularly with regard to the employment of the helicopter force, Air Command, and before it Operational Command, has since set a very high priority upon its support role to the other services and other government agencies. Concurrently, an enormous effort has been made to improve RAAF operational competence. This development process is continuing.

From time to time, we in the Maritime Patrol Group (MPG) face suggestions that we should be transferred to the RAN. Such proposals falter on the requirement to demonstrate a resulting improvement from such a change. Under present arrangements, MPG is able to effectively satisfy a very high proportion of the needs of our many and diverse customers as well as maintain our war fighting skills. The same now can be said for the other Groups of Air Command.

In my experience with joint operations, inefficiencies and difficulties seem to occur for one or more of the following reasons:

a. misalignment or misjudgment of priorities by executive staff which stems from single service parochialism, self-interest or interservice rivalry;

b. inconsistent command and control arrangements which are not always well understood by the staff who have to use them; and

c. lack of training and experience of joint operations.

Each of these problems is being addressed by the ADF. Executive staff exposure to HQADF operations and the establishment of tri-service training at ADFA and ADFWC should help to overcome parochialism and improve joint operations awareness. Command and control arrangements with the whole of the ADF have been substantially changed over the past few years and are still evolving. Finally, the three services are well geared to provide appropriate training and experience to those who must have it.

Previous joint awareness and cooperation were probably disrupted as an unfortunate result of the Tange Review which pitted the three services against one another and the Department. I thought that this problem of single service parochialism was fading into our history but this appears not to be the case. My hope is that future articles submitted to the Australian Defence Force Journal will better support the common good and are not divisive.

R. W. Grey
Wing Commander
Dear Sir,

I wish to respond to Colonel John Crocker's criticism of my article on the history of Australian peacekeeping in DFJ 86, Jan-Feb 91. I offer the following points in refutation and explanation.

First, it is incorrect to state that I described ASC INTAG service as 'lacking in hazards' as my article duly noted the arduous nature of UNTAG service. The observation I made was that UNTAG 'was the least hazardous UN peacekeeping operation Australia has been involved in'. Given the number of Australian deaths, the great number of Australian casualties, and the relatively frequent exposure to live fire that has occurred in the other missions, I stand by this observation.

Secondly, I made no insinuation, jaundiced or otherwise, that ASC UNTAG service did not warrant the conditions of service provided by the Government. The key point is simply the fact that ASC UNTAG's conditions of service were justifiably based on some degree of hazard but UNTAG service was not as dangerous as other peacekeeping contingents where similar conditions of service were not provided.

Third, as defence against the allegation of either selective memory or deliberate falsification and the insinuation of poor research, I can only point to the attention to detail taken in extensively footnoting the sources for all major facts and opinions, and the fact that this criticism, based on only two sentences in a twelve page article, is the only one I have received. This included submission of the alleged offending section for comment to the Commander of the first ASC UNTAG, and discussion of my observations, without demur, with several senior officers from both contingents.

Finally, Colonel Crocker goes into some detail concerning UNTAG's role in the Nambian elections and I have no disagreement with his description. Unfortunately space considerations prevented me from including many such details in the account of each peacekeeping contingent and the ASC UNTAG section of the article was no exception. This was an historiographical issue not a subjective omission.

The article sought to record a long and varied history without losing historical perspective. ASC UNTAG was a success but it needs to be remembered in its proper context, as just one of Australia's eleven UN peacekeeping contingents, albeit the largest and most publicised since the Korean deployments.

N. F. James
Lieutenant Colonel

Dear Sir,

I noted in the last edition of the Australian Defence Force Journal the criticisms of Lieutenant Colonel Neil James’ article on the history of Australian participation in multinational peacekeeping operations. As the Director of Operations – Army during the period of the ASC UNTAG deployment, I believe the criticisms to be unfounded.

LTCOL James did not state or to my mind infer that ASC UNTAG service was not hazardous. Nor can I find any basis in James’ article to support the allegation of a ‘jaundiced insinuation’ concerning ASC UNTAG’s conditions of service.

LTCOL (then Major) James worked hard in support of our overseas deployments while posted to DOPS-A and I have no disagreements with what he has described or the conclusions he has drawn in his article. We all agree that ASC UNTAG did a splendid job and brought credit to the ADF. LTCOL James’ article did not, at any time, indicate otherwise.

I.N. Turner
Colonel

Vietnam Service Recognised

Dear Sir,

Although successive governments and the Department of Defence have since the end of Vietnam War 19 years ago failed to grant full recognition to some 10,000 veterans who served in the vital capacity of Logistic Support, those Naval personnel who served in HMAS Sydney during the Conflict are now eligible for the City of Sydney Commemorative Medal.

This fine Medal endorsed by the Sydney City Council and sanctioned by the Navy was recently presented to the State Presidents of the Vietnam Logistic Support Veterans Association of Australia in Canberra.

The Ceremony was held at the National Headquarters of the Returned Services League and the Medals presented by Mr Ted Lindsay MP, Chairman of the Joint Defence Sub-Committee on behalf of the Minister Mr Gordon Bilney, MP, who unfortunately was not able to attend. Also present
at the presentation was Mr Ian Gollings (RSL), Mr Patrick Jones (AFFoA) and Rear Admiral Sir Brian Murray KCMG.AO.

This fine gesture by the City of Sydney not only gives just recognition to those who served but also to the Ship in which they served bearing the name Sydney. This is most important in the light that she cannot include her Vietnam Service in Battle Honours.

Applications for this Commemorative Medal can be obtained from the VLSVA of Australia in each State by contacting, QLD (07) 3713278 - NSW (02) 7641085 - SA (08)3846928 and VIC (03) 7001152.

Michael P. Prowse
President
Vietnam Logistic Support Veterans Association

Wrong Ship

Dear Sir,

I refer to the photograph and caption on page 11 of the January/February 1991 issue of the Australian Defence Force Journal (ADFJ) in the article ‘The Role of Blue Water Navies’ the FFG in the photograph is in fact HMAS Canberra (FFG 02) not HMAS Adelaide (FFG 01). I am sure readers of the ADFJ would expect such a journal to correctly identify HMA Ships.

R.S.Pritchard
Commander RAN EM

Dear Sir,

On reading the article in the Jan/Feb 1991 issue of Australian Defence Force Journal, titled ‘The Role of Blue Water Navies’, it was noticed that the pictured FFG 02 (HMAS Canberra) was incorrectly named HMAS Adelaide (01).

Hopefully this was just a minor printing error.

MHQ
Level Four

Spirit of ANZAC

Dear Sir

To you Sir my best thanks for The Spirit of ANZAC. Congratulations on such a very fine publication. It is indeed a shame that we, the ANZACs are facing up to extinction as it can’t be long for any of us now. I trust our pilgrimage lived up to expectations, it was a very wonderful couple of weeks for us, and personally it was a great honour and joy for me to be able to wear the green blazer and tie of the Task Force Gallipoli, and share with all at Anzac those wonderful ceremonies of the Dawn Service at Anzac Cove and Remembrance at Lone Pine.

I add with great pleasure The Spirit of ANZAC to my many gifts and memories. And am sure they will be treasured and honoured by my family.

Ted Thompson
(The old boy in the fez)

Dear Sir/s,

My thanks for the Australian Defence Force Journal Spirit of ANZAC, it is a very acceptable addition to my group of souvenirs of the memorable pilgrimage of last year.

The kindness of the donor/s is very much appreciated.

Harold R. Edwards

Dear Sir,

My father, Gallipoli Veteran, W. E. Parker, has received his copy of The Spirit of Anzac, illustrated by artist Jeff Isaacs, and on his behalf I want to thank you for sending it to him.

Unfortunately, Dad’s sight is very poor and he is unable to write now, but has enjoyed and appreciated my description of each picture and the printed word. It was a thrill to see him standing at the back of the picture of ‘Pilgrims Return’.

My two sons would very much appreciate it if we could purchase two further copies of this book, perhaps you could advise me on this.

The whole year has been so special, with many functions for the Veterans, and Dad has spoken to many groups and shown his photos etc. Lovely book, our thanks for this.

C. Charlesworth
(for Walter Parker)

Dear Sir,

I would like to sincerely thank you for forwarding on to me The Spirit of Anzac publication.

It is an excellent book, the illustrations by Jeff Isaacs are wonderful, it brings back my memories of our Anzac Pilgrimage last year, and my family and friends find it most interesting and informative.

Thanking you once again.

Audrey E. Possingham
S A War Widow
Dear Sir,

Thank you for the imaginative and beautifully produced *Spirit of Anzac*. It will occupy a prominent place in my ‘Gallipoli Pilgrimage’ souvenirs.

A.R. Kyles

Dear Sir,

Thank you so much for the copy of *The Spirit of Anzac* which arrived today.

I was very thrilled to receive the Gallipoli 75th Anniversary edition of your journal whilst on flight to Gallipoli last year to the extent that I was tempted to ask if I could be placed on your mailing list. Having served with the Australian Army Nursing Service for five years during World War II, hence my joy at receiving this wonderful record of our visit.

Nan Hamilton

Dear Sir,

Having noticed in the Jan/Feb. issue of the *Australian Defence Force Journal* the advertisement for the publication *The Spirit of Anzac*, I went to the Memorial to view it, subsequently purchasing it.

I am writing to tell you that I am very impressed with the publication. All those concerned have done an excellent job putting it together and I am pleased I made the effort to go and purchase it.

I do read the Journal, but not always from cover to cover, mostly looking for Navy items, before it is tabled at Naval Historical Society meetings.

I rather liked the change of cover this time, especially as it featured our submarines.

*(Mrs) Margaret Booth*

**Army Reserve**

Dear Sir

I am writing this letter to fully support the well-written rebuttals of Major Robert Hall and Bombardier A. Buckingham (*ADFJ* No. 86, January/February 1991) against Bruce Turner’s allegations of unreliability of today’s Australian Army Reservists.

The Australian Army Reserve has a proud record of wartime achievement in the defence of Australia, at a time in its history when it was imperilled by military invasion. I am of course referring to the distinguished service of the Australian Citizen Military Forces (‘CMF or Territorial’) Infantry Battalions who in 1942/1943, in participation with the 7th Australian Division (AIF) and US Army forces, first halted and then destroyed the invading Japanese Army on the Kokoda Trail in New Guinea.

It is a sad fact today that to a minority of inadequately informed Australians, it is fashionable to contemptuously refer to Australian Army Reservists as ‘Week-end Warriors’, ‘Cut-Lunch Commandos’, ‘Cardboard Cutouts’ or ‘Chockoes’ (as in Chocolate Soldiers).

It appears that like this inadequately-informed minority, Bruce Turner needs to get his facts right before going into print with his baseless criticism. If he has a concern about the prospect of either Australian or aliens infiltrating the Australian Army Reserve for subversive purposes, he should be reassured that potential recruits to the ARES have to pass, *inter alia*, an intensively thorough security checking procedure which screens out very effectively any recruit whose patriotic allegiance is in any way questionable. I can vouch for this personally, as I was once myself an ARES soldier with ten years’ aggregated service dating from 1965.

In closing, I have a final piece of helpful information for Bruce Turner. He should be aware that because of the self-sacrifice and dedication, nearly 50 years ago, of our RELIABLE ‘Chocko’ Army Reservists, it has been possible for him today to write his letter of criticism in the English language instead of in Japanese!

Richard Heller-Nicholas
The Battle of Greece and Crete 50th Anniversary

In May 1942, the small nation of Greece resisted the force of Nazism and gave the first message to the world that the forces of Axis were not infallible.

At that time, on Greek soil, forces from Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain were fighting alongside their Greek brothers.

The participation of the Allied Force covered all the Greek land and the climax of their contributions to the struggle against the Axis took place in the 'Battle of Crete' with the crushing of Hitler's Airborne Fighters.

On 20 May, the German Army launched an airborne attack on Crete where a mixed force of British, New Zealand, Australian and Greek troops had been organised to resist invasion. By 26 May, the position of the outnumbered allies was hopeless. Despite crippling losses the Navy embarked 12,500, some 12,000 including 3,000 Australians were taken prisoner.

There, on this famous island of Greece, Australian, New Zealand, British and Greek soldiers and Cretan civilians confronted the invaders. Crete might have been conquered but the message of the struggle of this Greek island will adorn forever the pages of history.
In April 1990, a group of World War I veterans made the historic pilgrimage back to Gallipoli to take part in the events marking the 75th Anniversary of the landings at Anzac Cove.

The pilgrimage involved the deployment of a Qantas 747 aeroplane especially named 'The Spirit of Anzac' to carry the veterans and war widows to Gallipoli. The Australian Defence Force provided medical teams to care for the pilgrims as well as an Australian Army Half guard, a military band a Catafalque party and escorts for each veteran.

The Royal Australian Navy was represented by the landing ship HMAS Tobruk, the guided missile frigate HMAS Sydney and the submarine HMAS Oxley.

It was the biggest overseas movement of civilian and military personnel in the history of our nation.

The Australian Defence Force Journal was there to capture the atmosphere of this emotional event and has produced the book 'The Spirit of ANZAC'. This unique publication is a collection of excellent paintings by Defence artist Jeff Isaacs with the narrative prepared by Michael Tracey.

The Spirit of ANZAC is available from the Australian War Memorial bookshop for $9.95.
Memory of Crete

By Charles Robinson

Late May 1941

In the little village of Imbros, high in the White Mountains of Crete, shadows were gradually filling the valley, and the Luftwaffe which had machine-gunned us incessantly throughout the day had flown home owing to the failing light. From clumps of scrub and rocks troops emerged and started to move off down the long precipitous road to Sphakia, and hoped for evacuation by the Royal Navy.

It was late May 1941 and the ill-conceived Greek campaign was nearing its dismal end. Imbros was merely a cluster of a dozen or so dirt-floored houses, and a small stone church shaded by a large tree. The road through the valley hugged the flank of the hill and passed around the church. It was here that the valley floor widened, and in flat ground the area of a football field there was a stone-walled well.

We said farewell to our mates as our unit moved out, shepherding walking wounded. Then darkness fell and the rearguard came through. They were being fired at by a sniper from across the valley, his bullets striking sparks from the stony road.

The church was serving as a dressing station, and on the bare stone floors were thirty very seriously wounded men and a further twenty lay outside under the tree. It was impossible to evacuate them and a little party made up of an Australian medical officer ‘Skipper’, two New Zealand stretcher bearers – Jack and ‘Curly’, and two Australians ‘Pinky’ and myself were there to care for them.

There was little we could do that night other than make the wounded as comfortable as possible, give morphine as needed, check that dressings were not too tight, and pass around water and cigarettes. Fortunately these little mountain churches are devoid of furniture so that we could move easily between our charges, who were lying on blankets, quilts or doors taken from the deserted village houses. Memories of that night bring back the stench of pus-soaked field dressings, in some cases fly-blown, of blood and of unwashed humanity; but more than anything the courage of the wounded who suffered great pain and discomfort without a whimper. Three German prisoners, who spoke good English, had been left with us to interpret when their troops arrived. Without being asked they helped us throughout that long night in easing the wounded into their least painful position.

We discovered some Mills grenades, ammunition and two rifles, which had been brought in with the wounded, and would be difficult to explain to the oncoming Germans. They might well imagine that the church had been used as a firing position sheltering under the Red Cross, and take reprisals.

During the night two men died, and as it was getting light we carried them out to a shallow grave, dug with difficulty in the stony ground. We placed the Mills grenades, rifles and ammunition in the grave, then the two bodies and covered with earth and stones.

Whilst Jack was brewing up tea I climbed the hillock overlooking the church to check that the Red Cross sign, made up from a white bed sheet crossed with strips of dark material taken from a deserted house, was still in place. Alas, a villager must have come down from his hideaway during the night and retrieved his sheet. Whilst re-arranging the material remaining to form a cross two Messerschmidt fighters flew down the valley. I was not wearing my steel helmet, and they obviously took me for one of their forward troops, for on my waving they waggled their wings and flew on.

The German Approach

Down by the church a Bren carrier was trundling up the road, and it returned about twenty minutes later to say that the Germans had been sighted, and would over-run us shortly. The crew called out ‘Good Luck’, and the carrier disappeared around the bend from where a loud explosion told us that they had blown the road.
The approach of the Germans was heralded by a continuous roar of automatic fire as they blasted away at every clump of scrub or large rock that could possibly conceal an enemy. One of our rearguard returned fire from beyond the village, in line with our position.

The Germans must have thought that it was coming from the church. They now directed their fire our way, sending bullets screeching in ricochet off the solid stone walls, and bringing down a shower of broken twigs and leaves on those of our wounded lying under the tree. We asked one of the German prisoners to call out when there was a lull in the firing and tell mates we were a bona fide dressing station. This he did, but another burst of fire which pinged around the doorway made him withdraw rapidly. He called out again but there was no response until suddenly a German paratrooper leapt through the door swinging his tommy gun at the hip. He looked so like a film gangster holding up a bank that everyone burst out laughing. This rather dented his moment of glory and in order to regain his composure he gruffly demanded a drink of water. Our German prisoner spoke with him and he left, still in a huff.

All that day German troops passed by in small groups—some in our captured army trucks, others leading donkeys they had commandeered which were loaded with ammunition; and then motorcycle outfits towing light field guns. They didn’t disturb us, but sent some of their own men for treatment. We were desperately busy moving out the wounded on their makeshift litters, whilst the stone floor was washed down with Lysol; cutting away blood soaked clothing to change dressings, and taking doors from the empty village houses for additional litters.

Our German prisoners contacted an officer and rejoined their army. We all shook hands. They commiserated with us on our captivity and we thanked them for their help.

We were now able to take stock of our position. Our medical stores consisted of adequate supplies of acriflavine antiseptic, field-dressings, morphine, and sulphanilomide. Where we needed splints, wood was taken from the village and sawn to size. A Holy picture from the wall served as our medical tray, and the stone font held our water supply, topped up as needed from the well.

Jack and Curly had built a trench fire outside, and had obtained cooking pots from the ever obliging village. Plenty of tinned food had been left with us—corned beef, meat and vegetable stew, and herrings in tomato sauce formed the main part. We
had no mess gear and empty tins had to serve as receptacles. The stew tins were used as drinking mugs, the oval herring tins as plates, with the edges carefully beaten down to give a smooth rim. The corned beef tins opened with a key, and therefore left a sharp edge which couldn’t be blunted. They were used as urinals and handed out with the warning—watch the edge we can’t treat circumcisions’. Steel helmets were stripped of their inner lining and used as bed pans.

A detachment of Germans encamped near the church, and some of them would come over to speak with our wounded and bring little gifts of oranges and cigarettes. They were well supplied with captured English rations and Jack was able to swap our large stock of tinned marmalade for corned beef and other goodies.

The Greeks Return

The Greeks gradually returned to the village from their hiding places in the hills, and some of the women would call with gifts of olives and goat cheese. We warned them to be careful as the Germans did not approve of fraternization, and we also apologized for having pillaged their houses. However on seeing the wounded they realised our need, and forgave with smiles. One charming lady called each morning with her small son who had a badly burnt face. He had been rummaging around some wrecked trucks and had struck a match near some leaking petrol. The resulting flash had singed off most of his hair and scorched his face. Pinky treated him with tannafax ointment, and fortunately it did not become infected. His mother brought eggs or cheese on each of her visits, and would walk amongst our wounded smiling and nodding. She was very popular, and quite unconcerned as to what the Germans might think.

One of our oddest treatments was on a thigh wound which we discovered, on changing dressings, was seething with maggots. Skipper prescribed a loose dressing without any antiseptic, to be changed daily and any dead maggots scraped from the edges of the wound. Within a few days the maggots had eaten away the dead flesh leaving a nice clean wound.

Work for all of us was extremely hard. Skipper as the only doctor was in constant demand. Pinky and I did the rounds with him, and on his instructions gave morphine, changed dressings, and cared for the patients as best we could. Jack was an excellent cook, making rich stews of corned beef laced with onions and other vegetables, donated by the villagers; or concocting soft egg dishes for those who could only digest light food. Young Curly who was about eighteen thrived on hard work, gathering firewood, carting water from the well, and doing the hard thankless jobs. None of us had regular hours. We would just lie down, utterly exhausted, to snatch a few hours sleep when circumstances permitted.

Sadly during the next few days three other chaps died, and were buried alongside their mates. It was a great sadness to see them go, as however bad the wounds we always hoped that we could help them pull through.

Sole Captives

It was now five days since the Germans had overrun our position, and we imagined ourselves the sole captives in that part of Crete. Then in the afternoon we heard shouting, and a mob of over a thousand men came over the hill. They rushed the well like stampeding cattle. All were in a bad shape, having had little or no food for several days. Many had broken boots and others suffered the agony of dysentery. There were about twenty wounded amongst them, and we persuaded the guards to let them stay with us together with ten ambulance personnel. Within half an hour the guards had the mob on the road again, headed towards Canea. They were a woeful sight and we were particularly depressed to see that the gallant rearguard had been nabbed. The battalion had got to Aphiakia only to see the last boats sailing away.

The following day the Germans sent a truck over the mountains from Canea, and we loaded some wounded abroad and sent ambulance personnel with them. This procedure went on for the next ten days until we had only two patients left. One of them had a stomach wound but was making a good recovery. Skipper asked the Germans for an extension in time as he knew that a bumpy ride could prove fatal. They were quite adamant—we were all to go with them. So we set off for Canea and captivity, and our patient died on the way.
Return to Crete

In 1962 I returned to Crete and hired a taxi with an English-speaking driver, to take me over the mountains to Imbros. Entering the small bare church I noticed that the Holy picture we had used as our medical tray was now back on the wall. There was no evidence of our stay, but the memories came flooding back and I could picture that first night in the minutest detail.

When I came out, a little knot of men had surrounded the taxi driver, and he translated as I asked whether they knew of a young boy we had treated for burns. A big strapping fellow hugged me by the shoulder and led me over to a dirt-floored house. Some of the others followed and crowded into the little room where, seated on wooden fruit boxes, we ate black olives and goat cheese and drank raki. I was pleased to note that his face was unscarred, and asked after his mother. He told me she had been betrayed to the Germans for helping escaping soldiers, and was taken away and never heard from again.

We stayed yarning and drinking until the taxi driver insisted on leaving, so as not to be on the mountain road in the dark. As we drove away I looked back, but heavy dark clouds which had been hovering on the peaks had swirled into the valley. The little church was blotted out as though by a curtain and I suddenly felt very alone.

Next day I went to our war cemetery on Suda Bay where our five dead had been re-interred with honour.

Charles Robinson embarked with 6th Division A.I.F. in April 1940, and served as a stretcher bearer with the 2/2nd Field Ambulance in Libya, Greece and Crete. Taken P.O.W. in Crete he spent 2 1/2 years in Germany before being repatriated. After the war he worked for Qantas Airways in London where he managed their first ticket sales office. Subsequently he formed his own travel agency in London, and returned to Australia to retire in 1982. Charles died on the 8th June, 1989. He has written a book entitled "Journey to Captivity" and it will be launched at the AWM on the 21st May, 1991.
The Battle for Crete — The Tragic Truth

By Brigadier A. T. J. Bell, OBE, (Ret).

In 1940 after the conquest of Europe but defeat by the Royal Air Force in the Battle for Britain, Hitler had to decide his future strategy. He chose to invade Russia and not to move against Britain in the Middle East, as recommended by Admiral Raeder. It is interesting to speculate on what might have happened had he decided on the latter course.

Hitler moved into Rumania to secure his oil supplies and into Greece to rescue his ally, Mussolini, after his disastrous defeat in Albania by the Greeks. The German General Student had been the leader in the development of airborne troops and was then commanding XI Air Corps. Through Goering, he eventually persuaded Hitler that the capture of Crete would both deny the RAF a base from which to bomb the Rumanian oilfields and would permit the Luftwaffe to attack British shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Earlier Churchill had pressed Wavell to develop Crete as a forward base for the RAF. However, despite Wavell’s victory over the Italians in North Africa, he was facing a German build-up there, the Vichy French in Syria, the Italians in Abyssinia and Rashid Ali in Iraq. He was short of resources of all sorts. Later he was talked into sending a force to Greece with disastrous results.

In April 1941 with the help of the Royal Navy, he was withdrawing his forces from Greece, staging some through Crete to speed up the evacuation. General Blamey had anticipated this contingency. About that time through intelligence sources, he became aware of the German intention to attack Crete or Malta.

Wavell commenced consolidating in Crete as best he was able. He had in Crete the majority of the 1st New Zealand Division and elements of the 6th Australian Division. He reinforced the 14th British Brigade in Crete at Heraklion. His main problem was that his forces from Greece were not equipped except with their personal weapons, and there were few reserves of any sort in Crete to equip or feed such a force. The Luftwaffe had commenced bombing Suda Bay and of the 30,000 tons of munitions and supplies sent from Egypt only 3,000 were actually landed. These included some captured Italian artillery and six Infantry tanks.

Unhappily, nothing had been done earlier to develop roads to the South Coast or to improve landing facilities there for re-supply purposes. Further the Chiefs of Staff in London had directed that in the event of an attack, the airfields were not to be destroyed. Crete itself was largely covered by the White Mountains. On the North Coast there was some flatter land mainly covered by olive groves. The main East-West Road ran along this area. The airfields and the two ports of Suda Bay and Heraklion were also there, all on the North side of the island closest to Greece.

Our Deployment

From late April, our intelligence information indicated an airborne attack about 20th May. Wavell retained in Crete HQ NZ Division and appointed Major General Freyberg to command Creforce. Freyberg gave the responsibility for the land and sea defence of the Maleme/Suda Bay area including the Maleme airstrip to the New Zealand Division and the air defence of the same area to Major General Weston and his Royal Marine Naval Base Defence Organisation. He gave the defence of Retimo airfield and Georgiopolus beach to the 19th Australian Infantry Brigade and the holding of Heraklion airfield and harbour to the 14th British Brigade. The six Infantry tanks were distributed two to each of the three airfields.

Up to the 20th May, the RAF maintained a few Hurricane fighters on Crete. These were hopelessly outnumbered and the survivors were later withdrawn. The Royal Navy was using fast ships to enter the range of enemy aircraft at nightfall, unload at Suda Bay and as far as possible, be out of range of enemy aircraft by daylight.

The German Plan

General Lohr had available to him XI Corps (Student) and VIII Air Corps (Von Richlofen). The
latter quickly established his Corps in Rhodes from where he could more easily attack Crete. He had 150 dive bombers, three groups of bombers and six fighter groups of 109s and 110s. General Student in the XI Corps had the 7th Airborne Division and the 5th Mountain Division (Wehrmacht). He also possessed 500 transport aircraft (JU52s). His airfields were undeveloped strips within 80 miles from Athens and these deteriorated rapidly.

Student planned a morning and an afternoon airlift, the first for Maleme and the second for Retimo and Heraklion. For Maleme, he allotted his glider battalion plus a regiment of three paratroop battalions. His reinforcement for Maleme was to be 5th Mountain Division which was to be transported by sea. Bombing was to commence on the 13th May increasing in intensity to the 20th May.

On that day, 75 gliders landed safely west of Tavronites River and out of range of the New Zealand defenders of Maleme airfield. Two paratroop battalions which landed on the airfield and high ground above it were largely annihilated. The other paratroopers who landed further east of Maleme were dealt with after some hard fighting, by the newly formed 10th NZ Brigade and Greek units. The German Divisional Commander who was to have landed there also, was lost in a glider over the Aegean. That night Student had virtually no radio communication with his airborne forces. He arranged for a transport aircraft to land on Maleme airstrip and take off immediately. The plane returned safely. Student decided that on the 21st May he would drop his remaining 600 paratroopers west of the Tavronites River and air land elements of 5th Mountain Division on Maleme airfield. It was a bold and the Germans thought, desperate decision.

The Germans expected a night counter attack on 20/21 May against their exhausted and disorganised force but no major counter attack eventuated. The Germans lost heavily from our artillery fire but used a captured tank to drag damaged aircraft off the airstrip. They continued landing the 5th Mtn Division.

**Our Defence**

Under the camouflage of olive trees from Maleme to Cania, 1st NZ Division was able to prepare ground defences undetected from the air. Only the Suda Bay anti-aircraft defences were permitted to fire prior to the 20th May. The Germans had estimated that there were only some 10,000 Commonwealth and some weak Greek troops on Crete. In fact we had some 30,000 variously equipped.

Maleme was held by the 5th NZ Brigade of five battalions and some anti-aircraft and coast defence guns. On 20th May, 22 NZ Battalion fought a gallant and determined action holding its ground, particularly the vital Hill 107 overlooking the airfield. In the afternoon, pressure was building up on Colonel Andrews' two forward companies and he asked for the pre-arranged counter-attack by 21 NZ Battalion to take place. Because of fear of the remaining paratroopers, this counter-attack was cancelled. Colonel Andrews collected his HQ company and the crews of anti-aircraft guns which had been over-run by the Germans. In the late afternoon, supported by two tanks, he counter-attacked. Under heavy air attack, his valiant effort did not succeed, despite the fact that the one serviceable tank created near panic among the Germans. That night, 5th NZ Brigade decided to counter-attack with two companies. This was ill organised and failed. Colonel Andrews decided that his two forward companies could hold no longer and he withdrew them. This was the critical decision and the hard fact was that unless a determined counter-attack could regain Hill 107, Crete was lost.

Despite various attempts by HQ NZ Division and others to organise major counter-attacks, these attempts did not produce the necessary result. The Royal navy sank and dispersed the sea convoy north of Crete by night. It was attacked fiercely next day while still north of Crete by the Luftwaffe, sustaining very heavy losses.

Under heavy air attacks, with mounting German ground strength, 1st NZ Division was forced to give ground withdrawing on Cania and Suda Bay. Fresh NZ units when in contact with the enemy performed with splendid results. Units of 19 Australian Infantry Brigade and the Force Reserve were available but were not used until too late.

On 24th May, General Freyberg handed over command of the Maleme-Suda area to General Weston placing 19th Australian Infantry Brigade and the Force Reserve under his command. 1st NZ Division was to withdraw to Sfakia on the South Coast. General Weston had no field communications and due to a mix-up of orders, the fresh and fully equipped battalion of the Welsh Regiment was placed forward on its own, surrounded and captured. The 19th Australian Infantry Brigade, 5th NZ Brigade, and the 1st Royal Marine Commando covered the withdrawal to Sfakia. The disorganisation on the road was a pitiful sight.
By 28th May, 2/7th Australian Battalion and other units of the 19th Brigade were in position astride the road on the escarpment above Sfakia. The 5th NZ Brigade was echeloned back on its left. On the beach below was a mass of units and stragglers with little food or water.

The Royal Navy had commenced evacuation on 27th May taking off 2,000 per night, sailing at 3.00am to be as far out of range of enemy aircraft by daylight as possible.

On 31st May at 7.30pm, General Weston arrived at HQ 19th Brigade and stated that the night 31st May/1st June was the last one for evacuation. The Navy could not accept further losses. He allotted us 500 places which could accommodate the rearguard units of the Brigade. The embarkation control organisation had by then broken down and it was difficult for the rearguard to force its way through the steep narrow tracks to the beach. Colonel Walker, CO 2/7 Battalion, realised this problem and took a longer route around the village to the beach. Unhappily the 2/7 arrived too late except for a few of its number to be embarked. On the orders of General Weston, all troops left ashore surrendered to the enemy next morning.

Retimo

A happier but eventually sad position developed at Retimo.

There the mountains came down to a narrow coastal airstrip about 100 yards from the beach. Two small hills commanded the airfield. Brigadier Vasey commanding 19th Australian Infantry Brigade positioned two battalions there, 2/1 Battalion commanded by Colonel Ian Campbell and 2/11 Battalion commanded by Major Ray Sandover. He gave them virtually all his limited Italian artillery equipment and the two infantry tanks to support them. Campbell was to command the force.

On 19th May, a German reconnaissance aircraft flew low over the airstrip. Against orders, a Bren gunner shot it down. From it, Campbell obtained two things - air photos of Retimo and the German signal code book. The photos showed that the olive trees had effectively camouflaged Campbell’s positions. Sandover was German speaking and later used the code to order delivery of support weapons, ammunition, food and even motor cycles.

On 20th May at 4.00pm, heavy bombing commenced. An hour later, a regiment of paratroopers dropped on the area. As at Maleme, very heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy. The only German success was the dropping of their heavy weapons company on 2/1 Battalion’s vital hill, dislodging the company holding it. An immediate counter-attack failed to recover it. During the night, Campbell organised a second counter-attack for dawn. It also failed. He then organised a further one in four columns, one column behind the Germans. This attack recovered vital ground.

During 21st May, both battalions assisted by Greek units attacked other German strong-points capturing some 500 German prisoners of war including the regimental commander and staff. On the following days, aggressive action was taken to clear the nearby village and factory.

Sadly on 27th May, troops of the German 5th Mountain Division broke through along the coast road. Orders for Campbell to withdraw to the South Coast at Plakios did not reach him. Campbell was virtually out of ammunition and food and because of events elsewhere, he believed he must surrender. Many of 2/11 Battalion took to the hills and in later months, 13 officers and 39 other ranks reached Egypt.

Heraklion

The events at Heraklion went very similarly to those at Retimo. At Heraklion there was a much better airfield and a good harbour. Brigadier Chappel commanding the 14th British Brigade had available to him three regular battalions, 2/4 Aust Battalion, 1st Aust Medium Regiment (as infantry), three raw Greek Battalions, 13 Italian guns, 14 anti-aircraft guns, two infantry tanks and six light tanks.

The Germans commenced bombing on 12th May. On 19th May, there was a heavy air attack and some bombers were shot down. On 20th May at 4.00pm again there was heavy bombing and at 5.00pm a regiment of paratroopers dropped there.

As elsewhere, the defenders inflicted very heavy casualties on the paratroopers. By the 21st May, there were still small German parties about being attacked and captured by our forces. One British battalion assisted by Greek units and civilians recaptured the town.

On 23rd May, the RAF flew in some Hurricanes to Heraklion. These were heavily outnumbered by
German fighter aircraft. The survivors were withdrawn.

On 28th May, the almost entire Commonwealth force was evacuated by the Navy. The force sailed at 3.00am from Heraklion on the North Coast. By then German aircraft were established on the Island of Scarpanto. Because of damage to some ships, some re-routing of the ships had been necessary. The RAF fighter cover from Mersa Matruh in Egypt could not find the navy. Heavy damage to the ships resulted, and more soldiers were lost than during the Heraklion operation.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Crete cost us 15,000 men, of whom 4,000 were killed or wounded. The Germans lost 4,000 killed and 2,600 wounded. The loss of so many highly trained troops was a severe loss to their airborne forces. They lost 250 aircraft.

The Royal Navy took off 16,000 men but left 11,000 in Crete. Nine RN ships were sunk and 17 so badly damaged that they could not be repaired in Egypt. Some 2,000 sailors were lost. The RAF lost numerous Hurricane fighters.

The Germans decided that although their airborne forces suffered badly due to lack of surprise, on the then state-of-the-art, airborne troops should not be used on their own as assaulting troops. Curiously our allies deduced the opposite lessons and rushed into airborne forces.

The creation of HQ Creforce and re-establishment of HQ 1st NZ Division after the withdrawal of the commander and his senior staff for Creforce did not provide a good command structure for an immediate and testing warlike operation.

Our commanders in the Maleme/Cania sector were largely trained in World War I methods. Apart from other things, there was continual underestimation of the will and determination of their troops to fight and win. There was a reluctance to accept re-grouping of forces according to the fluid demands of World War II.

All evidence indicates that vigorous early counter-attacks to recover vital ground could have won the land battle. With better preparation of infrastructure generally, to permit re-supply via the South Coast, it may have been possible to maintain Crete in the longer term.

Many of us at that time believed that had the German attack on Crete not been so costly, they might have attempted further excursions towards the Middle East. If our suppositions had any basis in fact, then undoubtedly the Battle for Crete put an end to these possibilities.

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*Brigadier A.T.J. Bell, OBE was a Brigade Major of the 19th Australian Infantry Brigade in 1941. This article first appeared in USI News. (Vic) – Vol 2, No 93.*
Freyberg and Crete's Defence

By Laurie Barber, Associate Professor in History, University of Waikato, New Zealand.

New Zealand's Greatest Soldier

Without doubt Bernard Freyberg was New Zealand's greatest soldier. During the course of World War 1 Freyberg won the DSO for his exploits in the Dardenelles and in 1916 the Victoria Cross in France. In 1918 he was a Brigadier-General in 29 Division and emerged from the war a respected commander. Invited by the New Zealand Government to command the Second New Zealand Division in 1939, Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, VC emerged from World War II a heroic and well respected divisional commander who earned Winston Churchill's title The Salamander of the British Empire. This was in 1945 but in 1941 Freyberg's reputation was less sure. He had led the Second New Zealand Division in the disasters of the Greek and Crete campaigns, and New Zealand politicians and critical brigadiers, bayed for his blood. The British General Staff rallied to Freyberg's defence. Wavell responded that 'Freyberg produced one of the best trained, disciplined, fittest divisions I've ever seen.' Auchinleck reinforced Wavell, by asserting in action he is a first class commander. Prime Minister Peter Fraser of New Zealand was convinced, but not so General Sir Thomas Blarney, who had been informed by Brigadier Vasey and Colonel Cremor that Freyberg 'had bungled his task on Crete'.

How ably did Freyberg attend to the defence of Crete, an island 8,288 square kilometres in area, 257 kilometres long, and from 1 to 56 kilometres wide, 100 kilometres south-east of mainland Greece?

When offered the command of Creforce, a 42,500 British, Australian, New Zealand and Greek force, deficient in artillery, armour, transport, tactical communications equipment, automatic weapons, and particularly in air support, Freyberg had been told by Wavell that there would be most likely an attack by five to six thousand airborne troops, together with a seaborne invasion. Although Freyberg was kept in ignorance as to the source of this intelligence, he accepted Wavell's word that the information gleaned was highly accurate. At the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park in England, a team of code-breakers had won a regular though fragile entree into several German Army Luftwaffe, and Reichsbahn (railway) ciphers. Wavell's knowledge of a German invasion plan originated from Bletchley Park. All signals from Bletchley Park were paraphrases of the original 'Enigma' German signals: they stated what the Germans were saying, to, and about, themselves. Some idea of the parameters of Freyberg's knowledge is to be gained from a study of his communication to the New Zealand Government dated 1 May:

A German attack on Crete by simultaneous airborne and seaborne expeditions is believed to be imminent. The scale of airborne attack is estimated at 3,000-4,000 parachutists, or airborne troops, in the first sortie. Two or three sorties per day are possible from Greece and three to four from Rhodes, if Rhodes is not used a dive-bomber base. All the above with fighter escort. Heavy bombing attacks are to be expected immediately prior to the arrival of air and seaborne troops...

Freyberg was updated with continuous information from Bletchley Park and laid his defences with this intelligence before him. The commander of Creforce realised that Crete's successful defence depended upon the denial of recognisable vulnerable points to any invasion force. At all costs enemy forces must be destroyed wherever they threaten to secure a lodgement that would allow re-supply and reinforcements. Freyberg's plan involved two elements, mobility of reserves and fixed defence. One essential ingredient was that the invaders must be counter-attacked immediately to prevent their securing an advantageous lodgement—an airfield or a port. The other was that the vulnerable points useful to the enemy, the airfields and the main port, must be occupied and defended. To offset any dangerously static flaw to his defence plan Freyberg ordered laterally mobile forces to reconnoitre routes to allow speedy help when static defenders called for assistance. A strong defence of Crete's aerodromes was of basic importance of his plan.

On 5 May Freyberg reassured Churchill with a cocky 'cannot understand nervousness. I am not in
Lieut-General Sir Thomas Blamey, Lieut-General Sir H. Maitland Wilson, and Major-General B. C. Freyberg. (New Zealand War History Branch)

the least anxious about an airborne attack. I have made my dispositions and feel that with the troops at my disposal I can cope adequately' Freyberg's operational goals were clear: the prior elimination of that fraction of German forces committed to winning a landing ground and then the total destruction on enemy ground forces.

The Invasion of Crete

The invasion of Crete began on 20 May 1941. The Luftwaffe had concentrated 1150 aircraft for an airborne invasion. Some 3000 German parachute troops dropped out of the sky upon Crete on the first day of the attack. The final number of German troops brought by glider or dropped by parachute was about 22,000.

Freyberg's plan had as its key the defence of the three aerodromes, Heraklion, Retimo, and Maleme, and Suda Bay. Despite the intensity of the initial attack his defences held. By the close of 20 May no airfield or harbour had been captured. The morning drops and landings by paratroops and glider troops around Canea and Suda had not achieved any significant military objectives. The Germans had underestimated the size of the opposition and at Heraklion and Retimo the invaders initially lost troop transport and air support coordination. At Retimo the invaders faced stern opposition from the most battle hardened troops on the island, the Australians.

The crisis occurred in the morning of 21 May when New Zealand Division was informed that 22nd Battalion no longer held the airfield at Maleme. At a Corps conference later that day Freyberg informed the brigadiers present, Puttick, Inglis, Vasey, plus Stewart, that a two-battalion counter-attack must take place. But while the commanders consulted additional German paratroops were landed, with 1150 men transforming the German situation on the ground. The slender, fragile, clinging lodgement of the night was now not impregnable, but certainly strengthened further. The Germans were clearly prepared to hold Maleme and transform the airstrip into a usable field at any cost.

The loss of Maleme, the first crack in the defences that would soon shatter the defence of Crete, should not be laid at Freyberg's door. This
A gaping hole in the island's defences was the direct result of New Zealand 5 Brigade's failure to carry out brigade battle plan and the orders of their General Officer Commanding. Speedy mobile intervention at critical points was basic to Freyberg's plans. Brigadier James Hargest did not implement his commander's orders. He was not present at the crucial conference on 21 May. He did not see Freyberg, would not go forward from Platanias to intervene in the crisis at Maleme airfield, though urged to do so by the senior officer in command of that sector, and would not move back until 5 Brigade fell back in general retreat. His lethargy was decisive at Maleme; his actions and orders later on 26 May created a hole, and began the final retreat of the New Zealand Division and an Australian brigade.

In the inquiry that followed the fall of Crete Freyberg was both slandered by several of his brigadiers and dealt badly by his political superiors. The facts seem to show on analysis that Freyberg deployed his force with every concern for the defence of sea and air landing zones, with attention to mobility and concealment, and realisation that air defence would be minimal. His orders were to hold Crete, and Crete was nearly held—despite his inadequacies in armament and ammunition.

Freyberg's plan was sound as was his delegation of local initiative to his brigadiers, necessary because of the terrain, likely communication problems, and his overall core responsibility. It is argued that it was 5 Brigade commander's failure to comply with Freyberg's battle plan that in a large measure lost Maleme and with it Crete.

Given German control of Greece in the Balkan, and Freyberg's patchwork army, it is unlikely that Crete could have held out for long, but in the crucial battle of May, it was touch and go. The commander of the German airborne forces, General Kurt Student, contemplated abandoning the invasion. Freyberg's defensive plan was sound, but in the final analysis only as sound as the brigadiers who were entrusted to effect it.

NOTES
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Laurie Barber is currently Dean of Humanities at the University of Waikato. An established author of a number of works on military and social history, he has been instrumental in promoting the growth of military history at Waikato.

The Battle of Crete

Philostratus
World War II Posters: Australia and Greece

[Image of posters]

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The Sixth Australian Division — Macedonia 1941

By Steve McDougal, 6th Australian Division Association.

The Australians and New Zealanders arrived at Pireas in the middle of March, 1941. The Australians were battle-hardened after their sweeping victories against the Italians in the Western Desert. To quote from The Official History of Greece Crete and Syria by the Official War Historian, Gavin Long:

"... as the ships steamed into the harbour towards Pireas the shores seemed to the New South Welshmen strangely like home—the hard light, the grey-green trees clothing steep hills and the clear water evoked memories of Australian ports. It was stranger still to find themselves among a friendly people, who cheered them and threw flowers at them as their trucks drove along the streets to the staging camp at Daphni. For the first time these men were on the soil of a people who genuinely welcomed them and in a land as green and pleasant as their own...."

A Captain from the 2/2 Battalion wrote home:

"What a contrast! Instead of waking with eyes, ears and noses full of sand we breathed pure crisp air with the scent of flowers. Flowers! we hadn't seen them since leaving Australia. After months of desert glare the landscape at Daphne was a dream come true. The Troops stood and gazed at the natural gardens full of shrubs and flowers and the grasses which made a swishing noise as you walked through... We saw civilians dressed as we used to dress before the war—civilians whom you could trust."

Then North to Confront and do Battle with the Invader

Again to quote from the Official Historian—Gavin Long:

"... Once away from Athens and its trams and taxis (wrote one observer) the past seemed very close. The peasants lived and worked much as they must have done a thousand or two years ago, when other armies followed much the same roads as ours and gave immortality to those towns and passes. At the end of the second day on the road the convoy with which I went north halted by a wide shallow stream between steep hills. As the sun set the men stripped on the shingle and standing ankle-deep in the clear water, had their first good wash for weeks. Some old shepherds stood and watched, leaning on their crooks. The sun, sinking between two hills, gilded the river where the naked men bathed and shouted. They might have been soldiers of any one of the other armies that have marched past Greek shepherds and their flocks and seen the snows of Olympus against the sky...."

The Allies were concerned mainly with two areas of Northern Greece (Macedonia). The area which lies east of the towering Pindus mountains and west of Thessaloniki and the other the Vevi/Florina area where the main road from Athens to Yugoslavia enters that country through the Monistair Gap. The first area was connected by the railway line which passed between a narrow pass between Mt. Olympus and the sea, crossed the Aliakmon River and thence on to Athens.

The Sixth Australian Division, 2nd A.I.F. was commanded by Major General Sir Iven Mackay. Elements of the Division entered the Greek province of Macedonia late March early April, 1941 and were deployed in the northern regions of the province.

The 16th Infantry Brigade was commanded by Brigadier Allen and the 19th Infantry Brigade by Brigadier Vasey.

16th Infantry Brigade, consisting of 2/1, 2/2 and 2/3 Infantry Battalions supported by the 2/2 Australian Field Regiment were to occupy the area of the Ueria Pass, west of Thessaloniki. The 19th Brigade consisting of 2/4 and 2/8 Infantry Battalions, supported by the 2/3 Australian Field Regiment and the 2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment were to occupy the Vevi/Florina area, defending the Monistair Gap.
By 27 March, the 16 Brigade Group was on the slopes of the Servia Pass with Olympus high above on their eastern flank and to the north the Aliakmon River.

Defending the Veria Pass

On 7 April in pouring rain which later turned to snow, the Brigade took up position defending the Veria Pass.

At the Veria Pass the 2/1 Battalion was positioned to the right of the road, 2/2nd Battalion to the left, 2/3 Battalion in an anti-parachute role and in reserve. The supporting artillery was the 2/2 Australian Field Regiment. The Brigade took over from troops of 12 Greek Division and because of the lack of the Greek language or, on the other hand, the English language there was a great deal of hand waving and finger pointing. The 2/2 Battalion were fortunate in that one of its Corporals could speak Greek. Two Battalions of the Greek Division remained and these two Battalions fought on in the Vermion Mountains. Other Allied Units at Servia were the Royal Horse Artillery and a Greek Machine Gun Battalion. New Zealand Units were situated on the right of the 2/1 Battalion and extended to the sea at Katerini. The terrain occupied by the Troops was precipitous in the extreme. The Brigade I was perched astride a mountain road some 3,000 feet (915 m) above the sea, with even higher peaks above them. For instance it took three hours to go from one end of the 2/2 Battalion to the other and the Battalion Headquarters of Lieutenant Colonel Chilton (later Brigadier Sir Frederick Chilton CBE, DSO, ED) were at 4,200 feet (1280 m) along a small track which took two hours to climb. Another problem was the great gaps in the line. Because of the extremely rugged terrain the left flank of the 2/1 Battalion was not physically linked with the right flank of the 2/2 Battalion. Whilst the right flank of the 2/1 Battalion was to link with the New Zealanders at the Aliakmon River, the mighty cliffs and precipices coupled with the distance to be covered by the troops made this impossible.

On 10 April two of the three Battalions of 19 Brigade took up positions at the Vevi area. The Brigade was less 2/11 Battalion which had as yet not landed in Greece. On their right flank was the Dodecanese Regiment in the region of Lakes Uegorritos and Petron, the 2/8 Battalion was next on the left, then the 1/Rangers (British) astride the road, then the 2/4 Battalion commanded by Lieutenant I. N. Dougherty (now Major General Sir Ivan Dougherty CBE, DSO, ED) covering a four mile (6 km) front to the west. Forward of the Rangers the 2/1 Field Company (Engineers) was completing a mine field. The artillery support came from part of a British Medium Battery, the 2/3 Australian Field Regiment and the 2/1 Australian Anti-Tank Regiment. These Units occupied the center position. With the anti-tank Regiment on the forward slopes; a position which later caused that Unit to suffer severely. A relatively small number of New Zealand Machine Gunners helped offset the thin Infantry line which extended over 10 miles (16km.)

In order to arrive at their positions the three Battalions (1/Rangers, 2/4 and 2/8 Australian Infantry Battalions had travelled in trucks along greasy roads all night; the 2/8 Battalion having spent the previous day and sleepless night by rail in cattle trucks. Then the men were forced to make long marches fully laden to spend the night of 9 April without shelter in the snow covered hills above Zinon Neeron in order to be in position by 10 April.

Operation Marita

On 12 December 1940, Hitler issued his directive for the invasion of Greece and wanted it to commence on 1 April 1941. The achieving of Hitler’s directive was given to the Twelfth German Army, of twenty divisions, commanded by Field Marshal Litz. The actual date of the invasion was left to the discretion of the Field Marshal, who would have to take into account the weather conditions.

The operation was given the code name ‘Marita’. From about 1.00 p.m. on 10 April, British and Australian guns fired at long range on German vehicles. It was most fortunate that there was no coordinated German attack on this day for the men of the 2/8 Battalion were still wearily climbing the steep hills after an eleven miles march (17 km) in order to fill the gap on the right of the line.

Snow fell heavily on the heights on the morning of 11 April and throughout the day the mist and snow made it impossible to see more than 50 to 100 yards (47 to 91 m). Later in the morning, German tanks appeared but were dismantled in the mine fields which had previously been prepared by the
Australian Engineers. The field artillery fired on German vehicles unloading troops in the area around Vevi. Then German artillery opened fire and together with heavy concentration of mortar and machine gun fire caused severe casualties among the anti-tank gunners who were sited on the forward slopes.

A little before 5.00 p.m. German infantry attacked astraide the road, but their advance was halted when they were half a mile (80m) from the forward posts by accurate fire from the artillery.

The snow lay heavily on the 3,000 ft. (914m) ridge upon which the 2/4 Battalion was deployed. During the next four hours the Germans continued to press forward. From 10.00 p.m. sharp attacks were made on the 2/8 battalion positions and a number of Germans were taken prisoner. They were from the ‘Adolf Hitler’ motorised division.

At 8.30 a.m. on 12 April, the Germans attacked with determination east of the road against the left flank of the 2/8 Battalion. They succeeded in overrunning the forward Platoon (Lieutenant Oldfield’s) and all but six of the Platoon were killed or captured. (Lieutenant Oldfield had enlisted in October 1939 at 18 years been Commissioned at 19 years and was killed at 20 year). The rest of the Company held and inflicted severe casualties on the attacker.

The low ground in front of Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell’s 2/8 Battalion was alive with troop carrying trucks, guns and tanks. The German infantry then advanced supported by the tanks which were firing high explosive at a very brisk rate. After six hours of fighting the 2/8 Battalion still held the heights.

However, the I/Rangers assuming that the 2/8 Battalion had been overrun were taking up a position some two miles (3 km) to the rear. This left the Australian Anti-Tank Regiment and the British Royal Horse Artillery without any infantry cover whatsoever. It was at this time that the Dodecanese Regiment on the right of the 2/8 Battalion withdrew in accordance with prior instructions. There was no blame attached to the Greek Regiment as they acted according to orders given prior to the German attack. It was most unfortunate however for these two incidents left both the right and left flanks of the 2/8 Battalion very vulnerable indeed. The Dodecanese completed their withdrawal by 4.00 p.m. By 5.00 p.m. German tanks and about 500 infantry reached the Australian Battalion’s line along almost the whole of its front. Soon the tanks impervious to the fire of anti-tank rifles were deep in the Australian position and overrun many a section post.

Then as darkness fell, the decimated Battalion endeavoured to withdraw in an orderly fashion. At 9.00 p.m. the leading companies reached the reserve position at Sotir ten miles (16km) from where they had set out. Small parties of weary men rejoined the Battalion during the night until about 250 had assembled. About half the officers and two thirds of the men were missing.

In the meantime in the centre position the British Royal Horse Artillery with two Australian anti-tank guns engaged and held the tanks and infantry of the enemy. They were under extreme machine gun fire but held out and ‘saved the day’.

On becoming aware of the deteriorating situation Brigadier Vasey telephoned Major General Sir Iven Mackay and told him the situation was serious. He then warned Lieutenant Colonel Dougherty to be prepared to withdraw the 2/4 Battalion shortly afterwards the Brigadier issued the order to withdraw to the embussing point south of the village of Rodona.

The Battalion withdrew in an orderly fashion although communication between companies and platoons was extremely difficult owing to the distance between them.

After leaving Zinin Neeron, Major Barham one of the Battalions Company Commanders was taking his small party along the road when a party of German motor cyclists appeared. Major Barham was at the rear of the party in a defensive position and after an exchange of shots killed one of the motor cyclists but was killed himself. The enemy however broke off the engagement and departed.

The column moved on, only to walk into a strong enemy position where the seventy of them were captured. These prisoners were later caught in cross fire and a number killed and more than 30 wounded. Meanwhile, the gunners of the 2/3 Australian Field Regiment who had performed magnificently in their support of the infantry had come under mortar and machine gun fire suffering casualties. They had remained in action until the enemy was only a few hundred yards away (250 m).

Although the Vevi position had not been held until 8.00 p.m. as had been planned (This in order to allow several Greek Divisions to withdraw) except on part of the 2/4 Battalion sector it had been long enough. Brigadier Vasey’s handling of his thin line during the afternoon had been cool and resolute. Some casualties had been inflicted on the enemy but the price had been far higher in relation to the small
General Sir Thomas Blamey

Australians crossing the Aliakmon River, Greece, after withdrawal from the Veria Pass (AWM 7478).
force who defended the area. Only 250 of the 2/8 Battalion were accounted for. The Rangers had also lost heavily. The 2/4 Battalion had lost one of their three rifle companies. The 2/3 Field Regiment had lost two guns and the 64 Medium (British) one. The Australian anti-tank gunners had suffered severe casualties and lost sixteen guns. The width of Vasey’s front made it impossible for him to hold the sector in depth. He was forced to defend only the crest of the heights. The intense cold and the sheer fatigue of the troops who had been hurried into position after several sleepless nights had not helped the situation.

On the morning of the 13 April, a rearguard was astride the road at Sotir. This position lay across a neck of land about five miles in width between Lake Vegorritis on the right and a marsh area on the left. The rearguard occupied a ridge across this gap. The Amindaion creek and the marsh on the left which came to the main road were impassable to tanks. Brigadier Charrington who commanded the very depleted 1st Armoured Brigade was in charge of the rearguard and had obtained the Sixth Division Commander’s permission to add the 2/4 Battalion to his force in order to strengthen his infantry, of which there was only one company of the 1/Rangers. The 2/4 Battalion now reduced to two rifle companies had been halted and deployed during the night on a line some three miles (4km) long on the right of the ridge with the Rangers on their left.

The German Attack

Soon after dawn, the German attack commenced and was effectively shelled by the British Artillery. The enemy advance was stemmed and during the next two hours the rearguard withdrew unit by unit. The 2/4 Battalion left in its own transport to Kozani and thence south to take up its pre-arranged position with the remainder of the Australian brigade on the left of the Aliakmon Olympus Line. It is worthy of noting that what was believed to be the last party of the 2/4 Battalion departed at 8.55 am. However a section of the Battalion under a dogged private, L. Gardiner (of Adjungbilly NSW) did not receive the order and held the position until 11.40 a.m. when he extricated his men, who were almost surrounded. One man was killed and Gardiner himself wounded.

The attack on Vevi was made by the ’Adolf Hitler Division’ together with tanks of the 9th Armoured Division. A battalion group attacked on the night of 11 April. The Germans deployed three battle groups for the attack on the 12 April.

Twenty six years before an Australian and New Zealand Force had landed on Gallipoli, several senior leaders of the force now in Greece had served at the landing. They were Blamey, Mackay and Freyberg. In this April twenty six years later Australian and New Zealand brigades were fighting side by side on a battle field in the Levant. This prompted Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey to issue the following message to his Divisional Commanders—As from 1800 hrs 12 April 1, Aust. Corps will be designated ANZAC CORPS. In making this announcement the GOC ANZAC CORPS desires to say that the reunion of the Australian and New Zealand Divisions gives all ranks the greatest uplift. The task ahead though difficult is not as nearly so desperate as that which our fathers faced in April twenty-six years ago. We go to it together with stout hearts and certainty of success.

The withdrawal in the Vevi-Florina area, coupled with the break through in the area between it and the Veria Pass made the holding of that Pass untenable.

The Order to Withdraw

By now German air activity was reaching its peak. Fortunately for the troops on the ground, the period between the 8 and 12 April had been overcast. Now that the weather had lifted the German Airforce through bombing and strafing on an intensive level was able to inflict considerable damage. The Luftwaffe was able to make its raids both longer and more severe. On 13 April, twenty one dive bombers attacked positions in the Servia Pass and on 14 April groups of up to fourteen aircraft bombed the forward positions and the roads leading to them.

The order to withdraw from the Veria Pass was received by the 2/1 Infantry Battalion (Commanding Officer Maior I. R. Campbell now Major General I. R. Campbell CBE DSO Knight Commander Royal Greek Order of the Phoenix) at 9:00 pm on the 12 April. He as ordered to withdraw to the village of Leventes, which was reached at 3:00 am. next morning. The first part of the march to Leventes over slippery roads and in the snow in
the middle of the night had been very demanding. Orders were then received to push on over the Marmala Pass, and cross the Aliakmon River to Velvendos. At 6.00 am the top of Marmala Pass was reached and below some 1,000 metres and six km away was the Aliakmon. Ferried across the river by the Australian Engineers (2/1 Field Company) they pressed on to Velvendos. They had marched 55 km for twelve hours under the most extreme conditions, yet arrived ‘battle ready’. The experience of this group was typical of those other Battalions who were ordered to withdraw from the Pass.

In the Servia Pass overlooking the river a New Zealand Brigade had been digging in. On the heights were the 2/2 and 2/3 Australian Field Regiments. The two weary and depleted Battalions (2/4 and 2/8) of 19 Australian Brigade occupied their positions to the left of Servia and a New Zealand Battalion a little to the right of the village of Kieron. The 2/4 Battalion faced east on a ridge 3,000 feet (914m) and on a mountain top 4,000 feet (1220m). They overlooked the village of Kteni. What remained of the 2/8 Battalion was in reserve. The Greek Battalions were to occupy positions to the left of the 2/4 Battalion. New Zealand Battalions were in place through the Pass itself, together with the 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion. The 16 Australian Brigade (2/1 2/2 and 2/3 Battalions) were ordered to the right flank.

In bringing the 19 Brigade across the Aliakmon River on their way to take up new positions the Australian Engineers (2/1 Field Company) were required to perform a remarkable feat. On 13 April, Captain Reddy of the Field Company had reconnoitred the position and chose a site for the crossing. Next day a party of the Engineers were sent forward to build a timber trestle bridge. With the most basic of tools, shovels, picks, ropes, axes which they carried for a considerable distance. Another section of the Field Company was ordered to make a road leading to the bridge. Arriving at dusk they waited until dawn the next morning then began to construct the bridge. They laboured all day of 15 April, helped in the afternoon by some New Zealanders and part of a British Engineers Field Company. Still at work at 2.00 pm, when orders arrived that the bridge must be ready for the crossing of the two Battalions of 19 Brigade by 9.00 pm. It was completed by 10.00 pm. A remarkable feat by a small body of men who before they could reach the construction site had a long difficult march over very rough tracks.

During the night of the 15 April leading components of the 2/2 Battalion took up position near the village of Kieron in the west of a New Zealand Battalion who were in the Pass. The remainder of the Battalion joined them the following day. In the morning of 14 April, the 2/1 Battalion moved from Velvendos to the foot of the mountains and rested there. The 2/3 Battalion remained in the area of Velvendos. That night as the moon rose at 10.15 pm the 2/1 Battalion climbed to Kieron followed by the 2/3 Battalion. At dawn on the 15 April the Battalion was met by officers from Brigade Headquarters with orders to proceed another six miles (9 km) to occupy the right flank of the Brigade’s position. A little to the south of the village of Pteri. They reached this position at 9.00 am the same day. It was about 5,500 feet (1676m) above sea level and seamed with precipitous ravines, the slopes covered in two feet (60 cm) of snow. They were required to cover an area of more than 11 km. It was thought that two German mountain divisions would attack in this area. The 2/3 Battalion remained in reserve adjacent to Kieron.

Generals Wilson (British) and Blarney, with the concurrence of the Greek General Papagos had decided however that because of the deteriorating situation in central Greece a better stand could be made at Thermopylae. The three Passes, Thermopylae, Brallos and Delphi afforded a better defensive position.

In the Servia Pass itself New Zealanders saw, at about 5.00 pm on the 14 April, German trucks bring forward troops. On the 15 April before dawn the New Zealanders who were supported by part of 2/1 Machine Gun Battalion repulsed several attacks, capturing some 400 Germans. Tanks had cautiously advanced to be repulsed by the Australian Field Artillery. However, in spite of their set-backs, the Germans continued to advance. Parties assembled in Servia where the buildings gave cover. The village was kept under constant artillery, mortar and small arms fire. The Commanding Officer of the New Zealand Battalion advised he was almost surrounded at his position forward in the Pass and under cover of darkness withdrew to a new position higher up the slope. A counter-attack drove back the Germans.

In order to comply with instructions for the troops to take up position at Thermopylae it was necessary to physically contact those Battalions of the 16 Brigade, who because of distance, could not
Site of Headquarters of the 6th Division, south of Olympus

get in touch by telephone with Brigade Head­quarters. The 2/2 and 2/3 Battalions were eventually contacted and issued with instructions to withdraw. Spread out over such rugged country as it was, the 2/2 Battalion after having received the order at 8.00 pm was still able to march out in the darkness at 2.00 am. The Liaison Officer from Brigadier Allen’s Headquarters, because of heavy snow and the extremely rugged terrain was unable to contact the 2/1 Battalion on the right flank. Fortunately, the Commanding Officer with a Lieutenant and a small party went to reconnoiter the country to the rear of the Battalion and to try to obtain both news and rations. There was a scarcity of both commodities. The Commanding Officer returned to his Battalion Headquarters whilst the remainder pressed on to the rear to see what lay behind the Battalion. They eventually, by chance, made contact with their own Quartermaster, who was at Lavadi with the rations for the Battalion. The Lieutenant in charge of the party was informed of the planned withdrawal and immediately returned to Battalion Headquarters to inform his Commanding Officer. By this time the Battalion was 24 hours late in withdrawing to its new position.

On 17 April, the withdrawal from the Servia Pass was completed and the Sixth Australian Division left the Greek Province of Macedonia.

The German superiority in tanks and men was now immense. Field Marshal List had three corps, including three armoured division, two mountain divisions and five of infantry. In reserve to infantry divisions, at call were fourteen more division, including three armoured. Add to this mighty array the squadrons of the marauding Luftwaffe. East of the Pindus watershed List’s Army faced six gallant but shattered Greek divisions and the two divisions of the Anzac Corps.

EDITOR’S NOTE

This narrative only mentions those Greek, British and New Zealand components as they affected the Australian’s role in Macedonia.

Steve McDougal was a member of the 2/3 Field Regiment, RAA. He served in Greece and Crete and was taken prisoner at Retimo and sent on to Stalag 7A near Munich. He was later transferred to Stalag 8B in Poland.
The most sacred duty of a citizen is to defend his country and shed his blood, if need be, to safeguard its territorial integrity. This duty is fulfilled in periods of war when a country asks its citizens not to spare their lives and to sacrifice themselves in the cause of freedom and independence. ‘No obligation is more important than defending one’s country’, the ancient Greeks used to say. The women of Sparta bade farewell to their men giving them their shields and saying to them, ‘Return either victorious or dead.’ Thus they expressed their desire that they should either return victorious or fall in the field of battle. They did not want their men back if defeated.

If it is the duty of citizens to defend the integrity of their country, then such a defence is the ultimate honour for the defenders of such principles as freedom, independence and democracy in a country other than their own. It is a matter of even greater glory when we bear in mind that these ideals were promoted and upheld in the country in which they first fully blossomed in history, that is Greece.

Such nobility was personified in the men of the Allied Expeditionary Force, led by General Wilson. The Force disembarked at the Pireaus Peiraus on 7 March, 1941. Their mission was to reinforce the embattled Greeks who were fighting against Axis Forces. It was now that Greece, with a handful of poorly armed troops, with no armour or air force, compelled Mussolini to beat a hasty retreat. When nearly all of Europe was conquered by Hitler’s forces, Greece, ever faithful to her traditions, defied the Axis powers with a Come and Get It. That was a new OKHI, meaning NO. Like a new David, Greece victoriously encountered a new Goliath in Mussolini.

The expectations of the dictator for a speedy conclusion of battle in Greece in a 24 hour conquest were disappointed. Hitler, forced to witness this development and wanting to impose a resolution on the matter, decided to attack Greece by implementing the contingency plan MARITA. The preparations for this plan had begun in early November, 1940. The occupation of Greece by the Germans was a necessary precondition for the execution of the BARBAROSSA plan, on which the campaign for the conquest of Russia was predicated. In this same period, the Balkans, Romania and Bulgaria had joined the Axis, while Turkey and Yugoslavia apparently maintained a position of strict neutrality. On 2 March, 1941, German forces had invaded Bulgarian territory. By 9 March, advance elements had reached and deployed across the Greek-Bulgarian border. On 17 March, during a conference, which took place in the German Chancellery, the conquest of the whole of Greece,
both mainland and islands was decided upon. In parallel with military preparations Hitler exerted pressure in an attempt to force Greece to capitulate to Axis. However, the Greeks were not intimidated and rejected the overtures of the Nazi dictator. They did this by making known their unequivocal intention to resist. Indeed, Greece from time immemorial has waged a struggle against opponents superior in both numbers and material terms.

In Defence of Democracy

Tradition demands that Greeks fight in defence of democracy, liberty and independence. Greeks historically have never conducted a war of aggression. All of Greece’s wars have been defensive wars, wars of independence or wars to bring about the spread of civilisation. From the Persian wars up to 1940, Greeks have always fought against superior numbers. Alexander the Great facilitated the spread of the Greek civilisation to the then known world. The Romans conquered Greece, only to admit later that, in cultural terms, the reverse had been the case. During the Byzantine Empire, Greeks conducted defence oriented operations to fend off the barbarians which threatened the empire. Under Ottoman subjugation Greeks successfully preserved the unique characteristics of the nation for some 400 years. In the war of independence against the Ottomans, they fought for their faith and liberation of their country. Likewise in 1941, as in so many times in the past, the Greeks were not cowed by Hitler’s ferocious army. They knew that eventually they would be overwhelmed but they nonetheless preferred to fall in battle rather than to give in to pressure as had other neighbouring states. They acted thus because they believed in the words a Greek poet has written. A poor translation captures them as follows: ‘You cannot expect to enjoy freedom unless you have such a strong desire in your heart for it, that your are prepared to shed your blood for it.’ These were the verses which were adopted by the British, Australian and New Zealander troops, when they disembarked in Piraeus in March 1941.

According to operational plans, which were prepared in cooperation between Greece and the Allies, the forces of General Wilson advanced to Northern Greece. The Greeks warmly received the Allies, who had came from distant lands to fight against Nazism. With what a generosity of spirit these soldiers must have been imbued, to travel thousands of miles away to fight not for their country, but for ideals in Greece.

The visitors from afar, observing the warmth with which they were being embraced, were amazed. For the first time since their arrival in the Middle East they were in a land where people received them with sincere feelings of affection. This land, its climate and physical character reminded some, particularly the Australians, of their own faraway country. This is how the historian Gavin Long described their reception:

‘...as the ships streamed into the harbour towards the Piraeus the shores seemed to the New South Welshmen strangely like home, the hard light, the grey-green trees clothing, steep hills and the clear water evoked memories of Australian ports. It was strange still to find themselves among friendly people, who cheered them and threw flowers at them as their trucks drove along the streets to the staging camp of Daphni. For the first time since they had reached the Middle East these men were on the soil of a people who genuinely welcomed them and in a land as green and pleasant as their own ...’

A captain from the 2/2nd Battalion wrote:

‘... what a contrast! Instead of walking with eyes, ears and noses full of sand, we breathed pure crisp air with the scent of flowers ... we saw civilians dressed as we used to dress before the war ... civilians whom you could trust.

People Whom You can Trust

Yes captain, it is true that in Greece you met and still meet now, people whom you can trust. It could not be otherwise, for Greeks are traditionally hospitable. One must remember that the God of Hospitality was worshipped in Ancient Greece. Dear Australian soldier, the environment in which you fought and wrote new pages in your history have always been friendly. You fought alongside Greek soldiers against Nazism. You developed ties of friendship which continued and were improved after the end of the war. And you, friend, Australian
The troops were given a warm welcome by the Greeks, and in Athens Australians and Greek soldiers fraternised in cafes. (AWM 6771)

The Allied Expeditionary Force

The Allied troops which had been moved up into Northern Greece deployed to the region of Central Macedonia to block the Kato, Vermio and Pieria passes as well as the corridor in the plain of Katerini. Their mission was to prevent the enemy's advance west and south of the Kaimaktsalan-Vermio-Aliakmon river general defence line. The main force consisted of the 6th Australian Division, the 2nd New Division, British Armoured Brigade at Edessa as reserve and the Detachment at Amyndeo. The total manpower of the Allied Expeditionary Force numbered 58,051 men: 24,206 British; 17,125 Australians and 16,720 New Zealanders.

On their right and left, Greek forces had been deployed along the Greek border. The Yugoslavs, having adopted a proposal by the Greek Commander-in-Chief Alexandros Papagos, protected Southern Serbia with four Divisions from a German invasion through Bulgarian territory. On 6 April 1941, at dawn, the German attack was launched against Greece and South Yugoslavia. At the same time, enemy aircraft flying from Bulgaria, bombed the ports of Elefsis and the Piraeus causing severe damage. The Germans, despite the
severity of their attack on the fortifications alongside the Greek-Bulgarian border, did not obtain any significant results. The fortifications resisted the German power. Greek soldiers held their positions, fighting against an overwhelmingly superior opponent. Thus they wrote new pages of glory in their military history.

While the Greeks repelled the attacking forces at the fortifications, the Germans crushed Yugoslavian defences and rushed along the Axios river valley towards Thessaloniki. The city is named after the sister of Alexander the Great. It was only then that the fighters defending the fortifications were ordered to stop their fight and lay down their arms. The fortifications surrendered because the neighbours of Greece were not able to resist the German attack. The Germans recognised the bravery and self-denial on the part of officers and soldiers defending the fortified position and presented arms to honour their opponents during their exit from the trenches.

Thus, the Germans entered Greek Macedonia, the land of Alexander the Great, the soil of which, from ancient times, has been drenched with Greek
blood. In this part of Greece, Alexander the Great son of King Philip II was born and raised. Recently, professor Manolis Andronikos of Thessaloniki University found and excavated the Tomb of King Philip, bringing to light archaeological treasures of enormous historic significance, which illustrate the splendour of the Dynasty ruling this most northern Greek land. Macedonia is also the land where Aristotle, the greatest philosopher of all time, and the teacher of Alexander the Great, was born.

Developments in South Yugoslavia posed the threat of possibly cutting off the forces defending Vermion. This led to the redeployment of the Allied Expeditionary Force. One battle group under the Command of the 6th Australian Division was tasked with the defence of the Bevi-Klidion position. The battle group consisted of Command Headquarters of the 19th Australian Brigade with the, 1st Australian Artillery Regiment, two Australian Infantry Battalions, one British Mechanised Scout Battalion, one New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion, one Greek Regiment and the British 1st Armoured Brigade as a Reserve Force.

Meanwhile, on 8 April, the Germans seized Skopje and advanced almost unmolested to the south. On 10 April, the Germans occupied the defenceless Florina. During the night of 10/11 April, advanced German elements established contact with the Klidion position. On 11 April, a German attack launched against the Australian positions was repulsed. German tanks, immobilised before the minefields, were not employed.

On 12 April, the elite German Unit, the SS Adolph Hitler Bodyguard, supported by heavy artillery fire, attacked the linking point of the Greek Army arrive in Serbia (Kozani) on 12 April 1941. The truck belongs to the 6th Division of the Australian Army.
The Withdrawal

The decision for the withdrawal of the Allied Forces was taken on the 16 April during a meeting between the Greek Commander-in-Chief, Alexandros Papagos and the British General, Wilson. In accordance with this decision, the Allied Forces, after a delaying action conducted in the interim positions, which inflicted losses and delayed the opponent, were deployed in Thermopylae position on the nights of the 19/20 April, 1941. This position, extending for about 50 kilometres from the coast to the Bralos pass, is of great historical value. At this place, tradition has it that the few fight the many and count themselves among the immortals of history. At Thermopylae, two exhausted light Divisions, the Australian 6th Division and New Zealand 2nd Division were to

Australian 2/18th Infantry Battalion and the British Scout Battalion. Despite the severity of the attack and the withdrawal of the Scout Battalion, the Australians bravely confronted the attacking force and maintained their positions until the afternoon hours. They retreated because they were ferociously attacked by German tanks and had suffered severe losses.

In accordance with the operational plans, after abandoning the Bevi position, the Australian 6th Division consisting of 16th and 19th Brigade, fought a delaying action and then deployed in the area of Servia. The New Zealand 2nd Division was deployed on the eastern foothills of Mount Olympus the place of Gods to the mouth of the Aliakmon River to cover the axis of invasion from Kozani to Katerini towards Larissa as well as Porta and Petra passes. At this position the battle, watched by the Olympian Gods, lasted until 16 April, when forces were ordered to withdraw and redeploy in the Thermopylae position.
Chieftain Kiriokos Katsantonis from Gouroulhous rescued Captain Petrakogiorgis at Temeni.

encounter five heavily armed German Divisions: two Armoured, two Mountain and one Infantry. On this site history repeats itself: A significant historical battle took place about 2,400 years ago. There Leonidas, the King of Lacedaemons with 300 Spartans, bravely encountered the Persian Army, who asked him to lay down arms because his fight would be futile. He proudly answered 'Come and Get It' (Molw'y ABE'). Leonidas was well aware that since his men were overwhelmingly outnumbered, his fight would be hopeless, but he did not yield and was not frightened by Persian superiority. Instead, he preferred to fight under the shadow of Persian arrows because he knew that his sacrifice would be to the benefit of his motherland. Leonidas stayed there at Thermopylae forever to remind passing people of the saying: 'Go tell the Spartans, you passer-by. That here obedient to the laws we lie.'

Like the Spartans

In April 1941, the small ANZAC forces, like the Spartans from a bygone age, were deployed there to resist extremely superior German forces. Their fight, was unequal and hopeless, but it served a specific objective. It demonstrated their superiority of the spirit, and it proved that ideas must be defended and not betrayed. Australians and New Zealanders fought there and shed their blood to remind passers-by that the Australians and New Zealanders in Thermopylae, thousands of miles away from their countries, fought against nazism for the cause of FREEDOM.

At dawn on 20 April 1941, Alamana bridge over Sperchios River was blown up. The bridge was on the main road and its destruction delayed enemy advance. This same bridge, was in the past drenched with the blood of a heroic monk, Athanassios Diakos, not only did he not surrender to the Turks but chose an excruciating death over apostasy. The Turks, in order to punish him for his persistence, after capturing him, impaled him. It was at these places and alongside such comrades in arms that Australians and New Zealanders fought in Greece in 1941. 'Greeks know how to die upright'.

Due to the quick advance and thrust of the
German forces, it was decided that all Allied troops should leave mainland Greece. The battle in Thermopylae lasted until 24 April, 1941 when the allied forces, having withdrawn towards the ports of Attica and Peloponnesse, were ferried to Crete. On 30 April, 1941, the last allied elements escaped and hostilities in the mainland Greece ended.

The Island of Brave Men

Approximately 80 per cent of the forces that had disembarked in Greece had left. About 27,000 men went to the island of Crete. The struggle of Australian, New Zealand, British and Greeks was transferred to Crete, ‘the island of Brave Men’, where one of the most important events of WWII unfolded. After the seizure of the Greek mainland, Hitler decided to seize Crete, since the island possessed great strategic importance. Crete lies in the middle of the eastern basin of the Mediterranean. It is at the crossroads of lines of communications by air and sea. For this reason it constitutes an important base for air and naval operations in any direction. Possession of Crete ensured control of all Mediterranean lines of communications.

The occupation of the island would bestow particular advantages to either of the combatants, the Allies or the Germans. More specifically Crete provided the British with: protection of British bases in North Africa; an advanced base for Naval and Air Forces to foray to the Aegean Islands and coasts as well as to the Romanian coasts; and freedom and security for lines of communications extending from the Pacific and Indian Ocean through Suez to Mediterranean and Middle East bases.

On the other hand, the occupation of Crete offered the following strategic advantages to the Germans: the ability to threaten from the air (Allied sea and air lines of communications); a base for further operations towards the Middle East and Northern Africa; and a danger free Aegean and unmolested lines of communications with the Black Sea and Adriatic Sea.

The importance of the island for the Axis Powers is best shown by the General German Headquarters communiqué of 12 July 1941:

‘... as a strong source of support, maintained by the air force in the immediate vicinity of our sea lines of communications through the Aegean, as an advanced base to cover and secure the flanks of the North African Front and of the British sea link between Alexandria and Malta, Crete was for the operations of the adversary in Eastern Mediterranean of a key significance equally from the offensive and defensive viewpoint.’

The island was of an equal importance for further operations of the German military leadership in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Allied Forces

Defence of the island was delegated to Major General Freiburg, under whose command were placed all forces in Crete. The defence was organised in the following sectors:

- Maleme-Agia: 2nd New Zealand Division under Brigadier General Pattik;
• Chania-Souda: Mobil Naval Defence Organisation Group under Major General Weston;
• Rethymno-Georgioupolis: 19th Australian Brigade under Brigadier General Vasey;
• Heraklion: 14th British Brigade under Brigadier General Chapell.

Reserve units at the disposal of the Commanders of the Forces in Crete were the 4th New Zealand Brigade for the Maleme-Agia sector; and a Welsh Battalion for the Chania-Souda sector.

Total manpower amounted to 1,986 officers of which 474 were Greek, 40,954 privates of which 10,977 were Greek.

### The German Forces

For the occupation of Crete, the Germans committed 22,750 men, 1,370 aircraft and 70 vessels for the transport of landing forces and supplies. 10,000 paratroopers were to make the assault against the island from the air together with 750 men transferred by gliders. 5,000 men would be transported by air in the occupied airfields and 7,000 by sea.

At 06.30 on 20 May, 1941, a unique page in the history of modern warfare was about to be written, which marked the beginning of Hitler’s downfall. According to the German Lieutenant Colonel Wittman, Commander of a Paratroopers Element: ‘... an unprecedented venture in war history had started while the people would witness this gigantic duel breathless ...’

Following a devastating bombardment the drop of German paratroopers comprising Hitler’s elite corps commenced. The blue sky of Crete filled with multicoloured balloons never before seen by Greeks. The people of Crete are profoundly sensitive to the ideals of freedom. Crete has suffered a lot and shed rivers of blood for the cause of liberty and independence. The Cretans know how to fight the enemy, whilst being hospitable and caring to those who fight in defence of their land.

The news of the German paratroopers drop spread throughout the island in a flash. It was then that the passion for Freedom flourished again in Cretans’ hearts. Men, women and children regardless of age, instead of naturally seeking cover, rushed to fight the invader and offer assistance to the foreign Australian, New Zealand and British defenders of freedom. Armed with any makeshift weapons they possessed, such as agricultural tools and even with stones the Cretans faced the enemy who dropped from the sky. Those who could not find arms made it their sole aim to kill a paratrooper and take his arms. History repeats itself here as well. The few Allies and Greeks inadequately armed, reiterated their faith in the just cause of the struggle. The same way in 1821, during the struggle of Independence of Greece against the Turks, unarmed Greeks killed Turks with stones and took their guns in order to use them. The same thing had happened in Albania during the Hellenic struggle against Mussolini.

Even those who could not carry arms, inspired by the struggle, helped in many ways. Some would carry ammunition, food and water. Others helped the wounded, cleaning their wounds with the Greek traditional drink tsikoudia and bandaged them with girls’ wedding linen. Everybody wanted to contribute to this honest struggle as an ultimate offering to defend the freedom of Crete, the island which gave birth to gallant men and women. Hitler and Goering had assumed the high command of the operation to occupy Crete. They had not taken into account the pride of Cretans. The Germans in Crete were to face, besides the armed forces of the tactical Army, the Cretan people, a proud, fearless, persevering and unbending people. They are a people who have written their own pages in history from long struggles and numerous uprisings for freedom. Maleme-Chania bore the brunt of German invasion. Due to the heroic resistance of Australian, New Zealand and Greek forces along with unarmed civilians, Germans suffered great losses. Despite successive German attacks, Rethimno and Heraklio were never taken over as planned. At the Maleme-Chania area, the Germans after many efforts succeeded in establishing a small bridgehead and took Maleme airport on the night of 21 May 1941.

The battle of Crete continued hard and relentless in all sectors until the 29 May 1941. Following an order by the Middle East Headquarters the Allied Forces started to evacuate the island. During this ten day struggle against German forces in Crete, the Australian contribution was significant and very successful. In the Rethimno area, the 2/1st and 2/11th battalions succeeded in containing the Germans and holding on to Rethimno airport (Pigi).

On 23 May 1941, a three hour cease fire was agreed between German and Australian Forces so that both sides could bury their dead. The Australian Lieutenant Colonel Jan Campbell rejected a proposal by his German counterpart to surrender after the German success at Maleme. The
Commander of Rethimno Task Force decided to capitulate on the night of 28 May, when he was informed about the collapse of Chania defence. The resistance of Allied forces was equally heroic at Chania where Germans applied their main effort. In this area the main bulk of New Zealand forces and the Australian 2/7th and 2/8th Battalions were deployed.

The opposing forces were unequal. The success of the Germans was due more to the lack of coolness and of a correct assessment of the situation by the defenders than to anything else. The Germans, after the establishment of the bridgehead at Maleme area set up a permanent base on the island. From here they started to gradually press the defenders. On 27 May, elements of Australian and New Zealand Forces, not only repelled the advance of the 141st German Battalion, but with successive counterattacks forced the battalion to withdraw suffering heavy losses. At dawn on 29 May, elements of the area were withdrawn from the hills, two kilometres northeast of Sfakia to cover the Allied forces withdrawal towards the Middle East. In the area of Heraklion, Australians and British troops maintained their position until the night of the 28/29 May when they embarked on ships and left for Egypt.

**An Unsinkable Ocean Liner**

In Crete, one of the most unique operations of WWII took place. In Crete, an unsinkable ocean liner as it were, the ambitions of the Chief of Luftwaffe, Marshal Goering and of the Chief of the German elite 7th Parachutists Division, General Kurt Student were crushed. Greek soldiers and ordinary people of every age and sex together with Australians, New Zealanders and British with their scarce resources, had decimated German paratroopers.

The battle of Crete was a Pyrrhic victory for the Germans, and that is why another operation of this kind was not attempted again during the war. Crete may have been occupied by the Germans but the Cretan heart remained free. Those of the Allied soldiers who failed to get to the Middle East or Egypt took to the mountains and down in the plains. The battle of Crete was a Pyrrhic victory for the Germans, and that is why another operation of this kind was not attempted again during the war. Crete may have been occupied by the Germans but the Cretan heart remained free. Those of the Allied soldiers who failed to get to the Middle East or Egypt took to the mountains and down in the plains. The blood of the guerrilla flows within their bodies. Some of their weapons were long outmoded, guns that had been used in the struggles against the Turks, a century ago ...

After the occupation of Crete, the Cretans continued their resistance on the Lefka Ori Mountain range and on Mount Psiloritis. They inflicted heavy losses and the German conqueror suffered heavy rates of attrition, but they also paid a heavy price. The greatest achievement of their guerilla war was the abduction of the German General Kreipe which was planned in cooperation with Middle East Headquarters.

The importance of the Battle of Crete was very significant for the overall Allied struggle against the Axis powers. The Fuhrer himself, on 19 July 1941,
instead of congratulating his decorated men who took part in the Battle, stated that: ‘Crete has proved that the paratrooper belongs to the past’, Churchill writes. ‘The loss of the best German fighters removed the tremendous, potential threat of the paratroopers from any further action in the events that took place in the Middle East ...’ Furthermore, General Freiburg, Commander of the Joint Forces against Crete concludes, ‘The Battle of Crete opens a new chapter in warfare and strategy.’ Out of the ten day Battle of Crete, many useful conclusions were drawn regarding the conduct of airborne operations. At any rate, till the end of the war, German paratroopers were not used.

### The End of the Struggle

The end of the Battle of Crete, marked the end of the struggle of Greece as well as of Allied Forces on Greek soil. Naturally, guerrilla groups conducted sabotage operations and inflicted losses on the adversary throughout the period of occupation. The price Greece paid for participating in the Greek-Italian and Greek-German Wars of 1940-41 in terms of human losses (dead, wounded, missing and POWs) was 2,327 officers and 77,416 other ranks. These figures do not include losses incurred during the four year occupation period in the country itself. Material damage was colossal. The losses of the British Expeditionary Force in the operations in mainland Greece and Crete amounted to 1,742 dead, 2,225 wounded and 11,370 POWs.

The Greek land embraces within her bosom the buried soldiers of Australia and New Zealand as well as soldiers and sailors of Great Britain. This land is also hospitable to German soldiers, victims themselves of the monstrous ambition of their leaders. Dead soldiers, resting either in Phalirio (Kalamaki), or in Souda or in Rethymno, or even the unsung but not forgotten, dead Australian soldiers of WWI who are buried in Lemnos and anywhere else in Greece. They cemented with sacrifices the strong ties among our nations, which toiled and struggled side by side against the Axis for the ideals of Freedom and Independence.

### War No More

These very same sites, where young gallant men of only twenty years from mainland Greece and Crete, though adversaries made a truce, amidst the ongoing battle, to bury their dead fellows. Those who survived, will join together this year in May 1991 to pay tribute to the dead. Lay a rose on their compatriots’ tombstones and refresh them with drops of tears. In these very same sites the past will meet the future and former enemies of yesterday, victors and vanquished will meet in this land which is equally hospitable to the living and to the dead after 50 years. They will hold out their hands to each other to convey their message to the generations to come, ‘Never again war’.

The Anniversary of the Battle of Crete and the Battle of Greece is celebrated this year amidst a time of contradictions, conflicting trends and fragile balances. War has broken out in the Persian Gulf. The nations of Eastern Europe could no longer tolerate the totalitarianism which was imposed upon them after WWII. They have risen in revolt, shattering not only the ‘Wall of Shame’ but their regimes as well. Thus, they have proved that the desire for freedom and democracy cannot be suppressed by arms.

It is of great importance that in this year’s 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Crete the participation of all should be equally impressive and meaningful. As friendly nations, the Greeks, Australians, New Zealanders and British, fought side by side for the free world, like soldiers. Now, as in the past, we should try to hand down the spirit of our cause and the sacrifice of our fallen fellows to generations to come, Peace and Progress — War no More.

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Officer — Royal Hellenic Navy

Officer — Hellenic Air Force

Nurse of the Hellenic Red Cross
The Royal Australian Navy and the Evacuations from Greece and Crete

By Richard Pelvin, Department of Defence.

The Flotilla

In 1939 the Australian Government agreed to the deployment of its destroyer flotilla to reinforce the British Mediterranean Fleet commanded by Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham. The flotilla consisted of HMAS Stuart, Vampire, Vendetta, Voyager and Waterhen. The destroyers were old, all having been completed in 1917–1918. With the addition of some British destroyers, they made up the 10th Destroyer Flotilla which was commanded by Captain H. M. L. Waller, DSO, RAN in the Stuart. From early 1940 Australia had also contributed a light cruiser. In April and May 1941 this took the form of HMAS Perth (Captain Sir P. W. Bowyer-Smith, Bt, RN).

As the Germans assault thrust irresistibly through Greece it became more and more obvious that it would be necessary to evacuate the British forces and on 21 April General Wavell, the Commander in Chief, Middle East, made the decision to withdraw. The evacuation was given the code name Operation Demon and was scheduled to commence on 28 April. However the situation in Greece was deteriorating so rapidly that the next day the commencement of the operation was brought forward to the 24th. The troops would be withdrawn to Crete and Egypt.

Planning for the evacuation had commenced on 16th April. An evacuation is a difficult operation at the best of times but Operation Demon had a number of complicating factors. The port of Piraeus had suffered heavy damage caused by the explosion of an ammunition ship during an air raid on 6 April. This meant that the troops would have to be embarked over beaches and involved the identification of suitable beaches and collecting small craft to ferry the troops from the beaches to the waiting ships. If this were not difficult enough, the command of the air exercised by the Luftwaffe meant that all embarkations would have to be carried out at night. The threat from the Luftwaffe was exacerbated by the totally inadequate anti aircraft defences of the ships of the Mediterranean Fleet.

Prior to Operation Demon the Australian ships had taken part in Operation Lustre, the transport of Allied troops to Greece. It is indicative of the rapidity with which events moved that the last Lustre convoy, escorted HMAS Vendetta and Waterhen and the sloop HMS Grimsby, left Alexandria only a day before the first Demon convoy. This convoy, AG.13, left Alexandria on 22 April. The Stuart and Voyager, the light cruiser HMS Phoebe and the anti aircraft cruiser HMS Calcutta escorted the special service ships Glenearn, Glengyle and the transport Ulster Prince to the British base at Suda Bay on the north coast of Crete. The special ships with their numerous assault craft were particularly valuable evacuating troops over beaches.

The Second Convoy

A second convoy followed on the 23rd and two more on the 24th including AG.15 with an escort consisting of the destroyers HMS Kimberley, HMAS Vampire and the sloop HMS Auckland. Meanwhile convoy AG.13, reinforced by the corvettes HMS Hyacinth and Salvia, sailed from Suda Bay for Greece the morning of the 24th. At 5.00 pm the Stuart, Voyager, Hyacinth, Glenearn and Ulster Prince parted company and set course for Navplion, the remainder proceeding to Rafi. Covered by HMAS Perth, they embarked 5750 troops without incident, but came under air attack twice while withdrawing.

The Navplion force, however, was attacked en route by German aircraft and the Glenearn suffered a hit but was able to continue with the operation. At Navplion itself the embarkation was delayed by the Ulster Prince grounding at the mole and preventing the other ships using it. She was set on fire by bombing the next day and became a total loss. The remaining ships returned to Suda Bay with 7000 troops on the 25th. The Voyager proceeded to Alexandria with a convoy and for the remainder of the operation was involved in screening the Battle Fleet.

On the night of the 25th the Vendetta and
Waterhen, whose convoy had been diverted to Suda Bay, sailed to Megara, arriving at 10 pm and joining there the anti aircraft cruiser HMS Coventry, the destroyers HMS Wryneck, Decoy, Hasty and Havock and the transport Thurland Castle. It was while embarking troops there that Vendetta's First Lieutenant, Lieutenant John Smallwood met his brother. Corporal Edward Smallwood, AIF, on the gangway. The ships returned to Suda enduring three unsuccessful dive bombing attacks, the Vendetta having her close range anti aircraft battery augmented by the concentrated Bren guns of the evacuated troops. They arrived safely at Suda Bay at 6 pm on 26 April.

On the same day the Perth operated with the cruisers HMS Orion and Phoebe and the destroyer HMS Defender, under the command of Vice Admiral Pridham-Wipple, providing cover for the various ships in the Aegean Sea. On the morning of the 26th the Stuart, with HMS Glengyle, Glenearn, Calcutta and the destroyers Diamond and Griffin sailed from Suda Bay to join the covering force. The rendezvous occurred at 1 pm near the island of Phalconera. When the evacuation ships departed for their various beaches the Stuart remained on the screen of the covering force. However the Glenearn was heavily damaged by bombing and consequently the covering force moved into the Navplion beaches to take her place. Arriving at 11.30, the Stuart was despatched to nearby Toros where she embarked 600 men from a lighter. Captain Waller asked for a cruiser to be sent to pick up more troops and ordered the lighter to return to shore to reload while the Stuart took her 600 passengers to the Orion. She then returned to Tolos and embarked a further 120 troops while the Perth embarked 910. The two Australian ships departed for Suda Bay at 4.30 am on the 27th and, joined by Orion, arrived during the afternoon.

While these evacuations had been taking place the Vampire had been steaming up from Alexandria with convoy GA.15. On the 26th she was detached to go to the assistance of the merchant ship Scottish Prince, bombed and damaged 40 miles NNE from Suda Bay. The ship was successfully brought into Suda Bay on the 27th.

On that day the Luftwaffe inflicted its greatest loss on the evacuation force sinking the merchant ship Slamat and the destroyers HMS Wryneck and Diamond with heavy loss of life amongst crews and evacuees. The congestion of shipping in Suda Bay necessitated sending a convoy of five ships, GA.14, to Alexandria escorted by the anti aircraft cruisers HMS Calcutta and Coventry and the destroyers Stuart, Vampire, Vendetta and Waterhen and the sloop HMS Flamingo. Closing to join the convoy the SS Costa Rica was sunk but the remainder made Alexandria safely, arriving on the 29th. The Australian destroyers then sailed to escort the Battle Fleet in covering the final convoy for Alexandria from the Aegean.

The Perth and Phoebe left Suda Bay with the destroyers HMS Decoy and Hasty at 9.30 pm. They covered the passage of the convoy GA.14 through the Kithera Strait into the Mediterranean where they were joined by destroyers HMS Nubian, Hero, Hereward and Defender. The ships then proceeded to Kalamata where 7000–8000 troops were waiting for embarkation. Captain Bowyer-Smith sent the Hero on to reconnoitre and she reported that the harbour was mined, the town in enemy hands and fighting in progress. Captain Bowyer-Smith decided to withdraw and regrettably did not change his decision when in receipt of an amplifying signal from the Hero stating that evacuation was possible. This action was the subject of a Board of Enquiry held in Alexandria on 11 June where the Board found that the captain's overriding reason was concern regarding intervention by Italian surface forces. However, he had no evidence for such a conclusion except some Italian Wireless traffic which might well have come from the Adriatic. After retiring from Kalamata the Perth, with other units, covered the passage to Alexandria of the last of the Demon convoys.

After the conquest of Greece and Yugoslavia the Germans cast their eyes towards Crete. It was decided to assault the island with airborne troops, to be reinforced by a mountain division brought in by caiques—small sailing and motor boats used in the island trade in the Aegean.

On the Allied side the Mediterranean Fleet had been reinforced by a battleship, four cruisers and twelve destroyers. These included the Australian destroyers HMAS Napier and Nizam, modern ships built in Britain and manned by the RAN. For all their modernity, however, they still mounted a main armament unsuited to high angle and their complement of automatic weapons, while an improvement on that of the older Australian destroyers was still inadequate. The same was true of their fire control equipment.
Since the fall of Greece the Mediterranean Fleet, including the Australian ships, had transported reinforcements and supplies to Crete and brought out surplus personnel. However, the island was still sadly deficient in ammunition and weapons, especially artillery. There was practically no air defence yet the German air fields in Greece were quite close and the island and the ships bringing reinforcement were subject to the constant aerial bombardment. Suda Bay could no longer be used as a naval base and all operations had to be mounted from Alexandria, some 420 miles away.

As the British became aware of the planned German air assault on Crete plans were made to ensure that the airborne troops could not be reinforced from the sea. Admiral Cunningham decided to control operations from Alexandria. The Fleet was divided into four forces which changed composition continually throughout the campaign. Forces B, C and D, usually consisting of two cruisers and two to six destroyers, were to operate in the Aegean and off the southwest coast of Greece during the night, closing the north coast of Crete by dawn and retiring to the waters south of during the day. Force A, the Battle Fleet, was to operate to the east of Crete, covering the other forces. The Fleet was deficient in air defence as the aircraft carrier HMS Formidable had been reduced to impotence by attrition suffered by her aircraft complement.

When the German airborne forces attacked Crete on 20th May HMAS Perth was part of Force C with cruiser HMS Naiad (Flag of Rear Admiral King, RN) and the destroyers HMS Kandahar, Kingston, Nubian and Juno was south of Kaso Strait. Steaming through the straits that night Force C successfully beat off attacks by two torpedo bombers at 8.40 pm and six motor torpedo boats an hour later. Some MTB’s were damaged. In the Aegean the cruisers took up a patrol north of Standia Island while the destroyers swept inshore to Candia. Next morning the force withdrew through the Kaso Straits being joined the anti aircraft cruiser Calcutta at dawn. Throughout that day, the 21st, these ships came under incessant air attack from 9.50 am to 1.50 pm and the Juno was hit and sunk with heavy loss of life at 12.49 pm. The Perth was near missed twice. A further reinforcement in the shape of the anti aircraft cruiser HMS Carlisle arrived during the afternoon.

That evening Force C returned to the Aegean, patrolling off Heraklion until dawn when the ships commenced a sweep to the north in search of German shipping en route to Crete. German air attacks commenced at 7.00 am and continued
without respite. At 8.30 am the *Perth* sank a caique containing German troops and a short time later a small steamer was sunk by the destroyers. At 10.10 the Italian torpedo boat *Sagittario* was sighted. Engaged by the *Perth* and *Naiad* she was forced to turn away behind smoke. A number of caiques were sighted in the distance. Rear Admiral King, however, decided not to engage as his ships were becoming too strung out to provide the mutual support necessary to beat off the constant air attacks while fighting a surface action, also anti aircraft ammunition was running short. Rear Admiral King broke off the action but the squadron aims had been achieved as the German convoy was recalled. A similar convoy had been broken up with heavy loss of life by Force D to the west. These actions effectively ended the German’s attempt to reinforce their airborne landings by sea until the fate of the island had been sealed.

The continual air attacks wore away at Force C. The *Perth* was near missed and the *Carlisle* and *Naiad* both hit, the former having her Captain killed and the latter having her speed reduced to 24 knots and two turrets put out of action. Force C fought its way westwards and, at 1.30 pm, joined the Battle Fleet, now designated Force A.1, which had entered the Aegean in support. The Fleet retired westwards through the Kithera Channel under the inevitable air attacks which were to cost it two cruisers and a destroyer that day as well as heavy damage to the battleships. The *Perth*’s anti aircraft ammunition had been reduced to a 100 rounds of 4 inch (less than thirteen rounds per gun) with a corresponding reduction in the close range armament’s supply. The cruiser arrived back at Alexandria on the 24 May.

While the *Perth* had undertaken her harrowing odyssey round the north of Crete Captain Waller in the *Stuart*, with the *Vendetta* and *Voyager*, was ordered to depart Alexandria on 21 May to reinforce the screen of the Battle Fleet. After conducting a fruitless search for survivors of the cruiser HMS *Fiji* the destroyers joined the Battle Fleet on the 23rd and returned to Alexandria with it on the 24th. Of the remaining Australian destroyers the *Vampire* was suffering from engine defects which would enforce her withdrawal to Singapore for repair and the *Waterhen* was engaged on the Tobruk Ferry. The *Nizam*, with three British destroyers, bombarded the airfield at Scarpanto on 21 May. Upon her return to Alexandria she embarked special Service Troops (Commandos) of *Layforce* and sailed on the 23rd for Crete with the destroyers HMS *Isis* and *Hero*. Bad weather forced the landing to be cancelled. The *Nizam*, with the *Hero* and the fast minelayer HMS *Abdiel*, successfully landed the commandos at Suda Bay on the night of 26–27 May bringing out base troops and wounded on the return voyage.

By 25 April the aircraft carrier *Formidable* had sufficient aircraft to carry out a weak attack on the Scarpanto airfield. The *Voyager* and *Vendetta* formed part of the screen when the Battle Fleet sailed that day to carry out the operation. Scarpanto was bombed the next day with some success. However the German response was devastating. Twenty dive bombers attacked the carrier at 1.20 pm damaging her heavily. That night the two
Australian destroyers with HMS *Hereward* and *Decoy* escorted her to Alexandria.

The *Stuart* also left Alexandria on 25 April with the anti-aircraft cruiser HMS *Coventry* and the destroyer HMS *Jaguar* escorting the special service ship HMS *Glenroy* to Crete with reinforcements. The force was subjected to continual air attack culminating in a mass dive bombing attack at 6.20 pm which heavily damaged the *Glenroy* and forced the abandonment of the operation.

### Another Evacuation

While these events were occurring the Allied position on Crete had deteriorated to the extent that by 27 May the decision was taken to withdraw from the island. The tired Fleet girded itself for another evacuation under constant air attack.

The *Perth* had spent her time in Alexandria reammunitioning, making urgent repairs and giving her tired complement leave where possible. On 28 May she embarked two assault craft and sailed with the *Phoebe* (Flag of Rear Admiral King), *Calcutta*, *Coventry*, *Glengyle* and the destroyers *Jervis*, *Janus* and *Hasty* for Crete. The force was bombed only once en route and again the *Perth* was near missed.

Sphakia, the south coast of Crete was reached at 11.30 pm on the 29th. Using the assault boats carried by *Glengyle* and *Perth* 6000 troops were lifted, including 1188 on the *Perth*. The ships sailed at 3.20 am on 30 May, proceeding south at 19.5 knots. At 7.30 they were joined by the *Stuart*, *Jaguar* and *Defender*, which had been sailed from Alexandria the previous day. The *Perth*'s luck ran out at 9.43 am when she was hit in the first of three attacks that day. A bomb put "A" boiler room out of action, killing two cooks, two stokers and nine passengers. As a lame duck she became the focus of the subsequent attacks but these were successfully avoided and the cruiser reached Alexandria at 2.30 am on 31 May. Repairs to her battle damage were completed on 25 June.

The previous night the *Napier* and *Nizam* had preceded the *Perth*'s visit to Sphakia where, in company with HM destroyers *Kelvin* and *Kandahar*, they embarked nearly 700 troops from the beach and delivered 15,000 rations and ammunition. On the 29th, as they returned to Alexandria, the destroyers were attacked once by German aircraft and the *Nizam* was slightly damaged. The operation was repeated on the night of 30/31 May but the two British destroyers were forced to return to Alexandria. The Australian ships continued on Sphakia and lifted 1,510 troops. They were bombed on the return passage and both damaged, the *Napier*'s speed being reduced to 23 knots. Upon their arrival at Alexandria the RAN's role in the evacuation ended.

### Fortitude and Courage

This account by necessity concentrates on the part played by the Australian ships in the lost battles of Greece and Crete and the much larger role of the Royal Navy should be noted. The outstanding feature which emerges from this story of disaster is the fortitude and courage shown by the men of the Mediterranean Fleet. It must be borne firmly in mind that the ships and their crews did not come into these operations fresh. In the previous weeks they had been continuously on operations transporting the troops to Greece, supporting the army in North Africa, running the Tobruk Ferry and resupplying Malta. All of this was carried out under the malevolent umbrella of Axis air superiority against which the ships anti-craft weapons provided a poor defence. Tired as they were the evacuations caused them to suffer an even greater scale of air attack, especially in the operations in the Aegean Sea on 21-22 May when the ships had to operate practically on the doorstep of the German airbases. Exhausted and dispirited men were embarked crowding the ships and often making relaxation impossible when conditions allowed it. The ships had to be maintained, a task particularly difficult in the ships of the 10th flotilla which were over twenty years old. A fitting conclusion is provided by Admiral Cunningham who wrote that "It is...not realized how nearly the breaking point was reached but that these men struggled through is a measure of their achievement, and I trust that it will not be lightly forgotten".

Richard Pelvin entered the Department of Defence in 1969 after graduating from Monash University with an Arts degree. He has worked in Defence Central positions in Melbourne and Canberra and then in Army Office. He is currently the Naval Historical Officer.
New Zealand War Artist on Crete

By Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Pugsley, RNZIR, (Ret).

By some quirk of fate New Zealand sent a war artist, Peter McIntyre to Crete. There were no official photographers on the Island and so today, fifty years after, New Zealand’s pictorial record of this campaign relies on private photo collections that were donated after Crete and the paintings of Peter McIntyre.

McIntyre tells his experiences of Crete in his book *Peter McIntyre War Artist*. The book illustrations are repaintings which he completed in the late 1970s. The originals themselves are now part of the National Collection of War Art in the trust of the National Archives of New Zealand. There are some twenty works in all mediums by McIntyre of the battle for Crete.

The images range from portraits of the Prime Minister and King of Greece in conference with General Freyberg, the New Zealand commander responsible for the defence of Crete, to various incidents involving New Zealand Forces during the battle.

Together they tell of the battle and despite being 'at best a hasty record than a collection of works of art', McIntyre’s paintings give a unique perspective to this campaign.

New Zealand 5th Brigade forward dressing station near Maleme 22 May 1941. 'The three figures on the right are wounded German prisoners. The officer attending the wounded stayed with his patients until captured'.

The alert at dawn - 27th Machine gun Battalion in Greece. (NCWA16)
NEW ZEALAND WAR ARTIST ON CRETE

Crashed German Glider – Crete (NCWA75).
McIntyre recorded ‘This glider landed near the 4th NZ Brigade. The bodies are of German troops. The glider crash-landed and ploughed along the ground for some 10 yards. Not one of its occupants survived.

7th General Hospital – Crete – 20 May 1941.
(NCWA301) ‘At 8 o’clock May 20th after intense ‘blitzing’ parachutists dropped to capture 7th General Hospital. They were driven out by 4th NZ Brigade within an hour. The Germans drove the hospital patients in front of them to screen their retreat up to Galatos which can be seen on the right in the middle distance.’

50 years ago, the shores of Greece were not so idyllic.

To walk the shores of Greece today, it's difficult to comprehend the fighting that took place here in World War II.

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Come and live the spirit!
A Slight Misunderstanding — Politicians, Commanders and Greece, 1941

By Major Jamie Cullens, Directorate of Army Studies

Introduction

The outstanding lesson of the Greek Campaign is that no reasons whatever should outweigh military considerations when it is proposed to embark on a campaign, otherwise failure and defeat are courted. The main principles that must be satisfied are that the objects to be secured should be fully understood, the means to achieve the objects should be adequate and the plan should be such as will ensure success.

All three essentials were lacking in the campaign in Greece, with the resultant inevitable failure. As far as my limited knowledge goes the main reason for the dispatch of the forces appears to have been a political one, viz., to support the Greeks to vindicate our agreed obligation.

Blamey, 7 August 1941.

The British Commitment

The origins of the disaster are to be found in the British commitment, made by Chamberlain in April 1939, of assistance if Greece were attacked by Italy or Germany. The commitment was to prove doomed from its inception and was further complicated by military and strategic factors in early 1941. This was due basically to the inability of Britain and her allies to concentrate sufficient force to halt effectively the offensive operations of both Axis powers. The Australian and New Zealand involvement in the adventure occurred because their Infantry divisions were the only formations that the Commander-in-Chief Middle East, General Wavell, could afford to release in early 1941 from the campaign in North Africa. As the token venture developed, it became clear that Blamey’s subsequent assessment of the principles involved with regard to the campaign proved to be correct. The aim of providing assistance to the Greeks was vague and generally ill-defined; the forces allocated for the task were grossly insufficient and the plan was seriously flawed. Despite the clear warnings from the Axis powers in 1940 about their future intentions in the Balkans, Britain made few preparations to honour her commitment to Greece:

If we had ever thought to help Greece, we should long since have laid our plans accordingly. Instead of which we took a deliberate decision not to do so.

Churchill was later to refer to the campaign as this tale of tragedy and outlines details of the loss of nearly 12,000 men of which 45 per cent were ANZACS. However, the British involvement in Greece was to have the desired effect on the United States:

You have done not only heroic but very useful work in Greece, and the territorial loss is more than compensated for by the necessity of an enormous German concentration and resulting enormous German losses in men and material ... you have fought a wholly justified delaying action.

Political Inexperience

The Australian political and military involvement in the campaign is a story of political inexperience, military misappreciation and reticence, preoccupation with matters closer to home, dependence on British intelligence and decision-making and a lack of effective, timely communication. In order to understand the sequence of events that resulted in the dispatch of Lustreforce to Greece in March 1941 it is necessary to examine aspects of the world situation. As early as 1939 Eden believed that all nations who were anti-fascist in Europe should unite and make military plans to counter the worst contingencies. With the invasion of Albania by Mussolini in early 1939 and the subsequent guarantee of assistance by Britain to Greece, Britain was faced with the
dilemma of possibly having to provide forces to that country from scant resources that were already over extended in the Mediterranean.

Help to Greece

By August of the following year Eden, now Secretary of State for War, realised that an expeditionary force might be required in the Balkans to counter the growing Italian threat. Churchill at the same time was developing the concept of creating a strong alliance of the Balkan nations against Germany. These problems were compounded from the British point of view where Egypt was regarded as the crux of their position in the Middle East and this position could not be compromised by the uncertain situation in the Balkans at the end of 1940. The Greeks were holding off the Italians on their own. Hitler had on the other hand, directed the German Army to commence planning for the invasion of Greece and on the 13 December 1940, orders were issued for the attack on Greece through Bulgaria. In January 1941, the British Defence Committee ‘decided to approach the Greeks about the dispatch of British force to Salonika’. The Greeks initially refused this offer believing that British forces in their country would give the German Army an excuse to attack. The British prudently decided not to press the issue until the Greeks returned with a request for information on the size of the British forces being prepared for Greece the following month. This request was essentially the fait accompli and Eden was quick to assess its diplomatic ramifications:

If another country to which we had given such a pledge were to fall to the Axis powers without a real British effort to prevent it, the effect especially in the United States, must be deplorable.

By February 1941, Eden’s instructions from Churchill were to send speedy help to Greece in the belief that our first duty was to fight and if necessary to suffer, with Greece. His speedy dispatch to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans to resolve the diplomatic issues resulted in his meeting on 20 February with the three Commanders-in-Chief in Cairo. At this meeting the first seeds of doubt the venture were sown:

There is grave risk in this course and much must depend on the speed and secrecy with which it can be carried out. But to stand idly by and see Germany win a victory over Greece, probably a bloodless one at that, seems the worst of all sources.

Wavell had identified the composition of his expeditionary force of three divisions, two of which were to be Australian, and Eden advised Churchill that the venture was a gamble, with no guarantee of success, but there was a chance that the Allies would be able to halt the Germans before Greece was completely overrun. The British had overcome that dangerous inertia by taking definitive action despite intelligence reports which indicated that the Germans had in excess of twenty division, several of them mechanised, concentrating in Bulgaria. Australia at this stage seemed to be blissfully unaware of the catastrophe looming on the Balkan horizon.

In Australia, Menzies had made the decision to visit the Middle East and Britain on 25 November 1940. At the time, he was the leader of a party that had only majority of two Independents and his decision was regarded with scepticism by many. In his memoirs, Menzies was to later claim that aspects of the Singapore strategy and Australia’s concern about the intentions of a northern neighbour were the reason for the visit:

The whole reason why I went to England was to discuss the menace and to urge the strengthening of the defences of Singapore.

En route to London, Menzies visited the considerable Australian forces in the Middle East where he spent time with both Wavell and Blamey. By the time of his visit in February 1941, planning would have been well underway for the Greek Venture and Wavell would have identified the Australian divisions which were planned to form the bulk of the combat troops. In his memoirs, Menzies makes no mention of any discussion with Wavell on the commitment of Australian forces to the campaign although Wavell was to claim when discussing the proposal with Blamey on 18 February that the Australian Government had been informed.

Prior to February 1941, there is definite evidence that the Australian Government was aware of what was going to happen in the Balkans. On 12 November 1940, Menzies, in
Australia, had complained to Bruce, the High Commissioner in London, that it does not even know whether its soldiers have gone to Greece or into action as the case may be. Britain further advised the Australian Government on 23rd December that it had the option of prosecuting the war in Greece. The warning signs were certainly present but there is also little evidence that the Government investigated the issue any further. Gavin Long in the Official History highlights the problems of the Australian Government as a junior partner in the World War. He makes it quite clear that the Dominion Governments were not always fully briefed on aspects of military strategy and policy. Invariably there was too little information provided too late to allow the Australian Government to make an independent assessment. They were also cautious about publicly disputing major allied decisions and the ‘habit of accepting the solution offered by senior British leaders was deeply ingrained’. The Government was certainly at fault for not pursuing information on the employment of Australian forces.

The Australian Advisory War Council met for the first time on 5th February 1941. Fadden succinctly outlined its functions:

Although technically without any responsibility of Government decision, it became the means by which the Opposition not only was informed, but was able to participate in deliberations which led to the making of important decisions regarding national defence and security. When an agreement in principle was reached by the top members of the Government and the Opposition who comprised the Council, the chances of its acceptance by the parties, and the Parliament, were increased immeasurably.

As the ‘Most Secret and Confidential’ cables relating to the issue of the commitment of the Australian 6th Division to the Greek adventure are examined, the involvement of the Prime Minister and the Council is revealed as an ongoing process of compromise.

First Meeting

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The first major summary of the proposal was provided by Menzies in London, to the Acting Prime Minister, Artie Fadden on 25th February 1941. By this stage Menzies had given approval for Australian involvement to the British War Cabinet without discussing the proposal with the Australian Government. Menzies did not discuss the proposal with Blamey whilst he was in Egypt en route to London. To maintain a united front there was little else that the Government could do except concur and it was done the following day. Cablegram 153, the initial Menzies appreciate is a fascinating document in that it details the consequences of failure in Greece. Menzies did not state in the Cablegram that he had given approval for Australian involvement but said that military assistance was ‘proposed’. Even at this stage he pointed out that the ‘enterprise is risky’. He also mentions the possibility of evacuation and then states:

I specifically reserved all rights of the Australian Government but you will understand that the matter is most urgent and that your view should therefore be communicated promptly.

One can but wonder what would have happened if the Government had not given its concurrence. The reply from Fadden was both astute and realistic. He asked whether the force was big enough for the task; questioned the equipment scaling for the Australian forces; and, most importantly, demanded that evacuation arrangements be properly prepared. Elements of this document could be seen as being a clever political ploy to ensure that the Government had all aspects covered in event of failure of the campaign. There seemed to be little further correspondence on this crucial issue until 5th March when Blarney dispatched his now famous letter to Menzies complaining bitterly about the failure of the British Government and Wavell to select him for the command position in Greece. He did remark however that he was confident that the Australians would perform well.

By the beginning of March, Menzies was not so optimistic in his outlook. The adventure was now ‘by no means hopeless’. This was his most reassuring comment despite the fact that he claimed both Freyberg and Blamey were in agreement with the proposal. Both Freyberg and Blamey in fact had major reservations about the campaign. Fadden was also displaying further concerns when he cabled Menzies on 10th
March. The proposal had now become a 'grave risk' and there were doubts that the commanders involved had conducted a full appreciation of the 'hazardous nature of the operation'. These concerns were now coming to the fore after the movement of Dominion troops by sea had already commenced. Despite the garbled nature of his reply there can be little doubt that the Australian Government had supported the adventure.

Blamey meanwhile had been uncharacteristically reticent in expressing his views on the issue. According to his ADC, Carlyon, he emphatically stated in early March that:

It is not my duty to challenge an order.

This view was based on a belief that the proposal had already the concurrence of the Australian Government. As a senior commander he had little choice but to get on with the job in hand although it is the opinion of both Horner and Long that he should have made more noise about the issue during its early planning stages. Finally on the 9th and 10th of March he dispatched to P. C. Spender, the Minister for the Army, a brief but balanced assessment of the situation. He examined the political ramifications of the failure to reinforce Greece and displayed that he was fully aware of the Australian Government's preoccupation with the Japanese threat.

Blamey's loyalty to Wavell is dwelt upon by Horner and it is an important factor to note. If Blamey had continually undermined Wavell's authority by operating independently or behind the Commander-in-Chief's back, both morale and mutual trust would have been grievously affected. This situation highlights the problems faced by a national commander who works for a big power.

Fadden, on 27th March, outlined the concern of the Australian Government to Menzies that the opinion of Blamey had not been sought at the commencement of planning for the adventure. Menzies' reply, two days later, was trite and non-committal implying that Blamey had done little to keep him informed. Blamey's detailed appreciation received by the Australian Government in early April concentrated upon the requirement for more air assets and air defence units. With the German onslaught only three days away this last desperate appeal was to go unheeded. The problem was soon further complicated by the introduction of the Afrika Korps to Cyrenaica and the subsequent cancellation of the planned move of the Australian 7th Division to reinforce Lustre force. By 6th April, the realities of the situation in both the Balkans and Libya seem to have taken precedence over Australia's preoccupation with Japan. On 8th April even Menzies seemed to be coming to grips with the truth when he advised Fadden:

We must prepare our minds for some reversals, but at the moment, the position in the Balkans, through obscure and dangerous, is better than we could have hoped for a few weeks ago.

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The Final Chapter

The final chapter of the political involvement in the Greek adventure was marked by Fadden on 17th April when he advised the British Government that the Australian Government agreed with the decision to send troops to Greece believing it to have been 'strategically correct' but at the same time requesting advice on the proposals for evacuation. Even now with the situation unclear the Australian Government, with little else to offer, was requesting information on the next British decisions that would affect the livelihood of the Australian forces.

Blamey's military performance during the campaign has been critically examined by several historians. His attitudes towards the adventure were evident soon after his arrival in Greece when one of his initial projects was an examination of likely evacuation locations. These planning activities displayed the qualities of intuitive foresight and appreciation required in a commander. Blamey assumed command of the newly re-formed Anzac Corps on 12th April and from this point until his departure from Greece, on order from Wavell, (on 23rd April), his performance should be regarded as most commendable. In words of Long:

In retrospect, the fighting withdrawal of more than 300 miles, generally along a single road, with loss of but one fighting unit, seems an outstanding military achievement.

Controversy over his capability to command under the conditions of extreme stress generated by continual withdrawal is still evident.
Carlyon’s loyalty is admirable however I would tend to agree more with Rowell’s views on his commander’s performance. He believed that command of the Australian forces in Greece should have been given to ‘younger and more active commanders’.33 Not surprisingly, Blamey according to Rowell, was in a ‘tired and distressed’ state by 22nd April 1941.44

The distinct lack of communication between parties at the highest level of Government is a major issue that frequently appears in a study of this campaign. The Australian Government was fed information piecemeal although I do not believe that there is sufficient evidence, as proposed by Woodward, to support a claim of a British ‘sleight of hand’ in committing Australian troops without consent.45 The authority that Menzies had as Prime Minister representing Australia in London was certainly misinterpreted by the British War Cabinet. This situation was certainly not clarified by Menzies. Australia certainly suffered as a junior partner without her own independent means of gathering intelligence. Information received was always tainted by British opinion. Horner also highlights the inexperience of the Australian Cabinet as being major contributing factor.46 In the early stages of the War, Britain certainly believed that she could use Dominion forces as she wished. Blamey fought long and hard to maintain the integrity of the Second AIF, but even he was reticent in providing his Government with a timely, professional appreciation of the likely outcome in Greece. This was his responsibility as a national contingent commander.

Perhaps two good things resulted from the whole issue. The German invasion of Russia was postponed by more than a month and; no longer were British military assessments or Churchillian assurances to be accepted by the Australian Government in the face of contrary advice from the Australian Commander-in-Chief.47

The campaign in Greece is a fascinating tragedy. Surely few campaigns in history can have been initiated with such early concentration on planning for failure and subsequent evacuation. The story reveals many lessons which are still pertinent to politicians and commanders. Failure in communication between Government and its military advisers in the future will have greater consequences than did a slight misunderstanding on the issue of commitment to Greece.

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Major Cullens is an Infantry Officer who has served at OCS Portsea, in Kashmir and in the Operation Deployment Force. During a posting to the US Army’s Rapid Deployment Force he served in Korea, Egypt, Panama and Latin America.
Some Personal Recollections of the Syrian and Iraq Campaign 1941

By Colonel John P. Buckley, OBE, ED (RL)

Foreword

By General Peter Gration, AC, OBE,
Chief of the Australian Defence Force

I am delighted that Colonel John Buckley has invited me to provide a foreword to his latest article for the Australian Defence Force Journal ‘Recollections of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq 1941’. This is topical not only because the fiftieth anniversary is at hand, but also because of the renewed focus of world attention on this region with the Gulf War against Iraq.

There are a good many official and unofficial histories embracing the 1941 campaigns, including Gavin Long’s Official History of Greece, Crete and Syria. John Buckley’s article does not claim to be a history although it is full of accurate and relevant historical data. Rather it is a fascinating and lively account of his personal experiences in the campaign, where his appointment as a ‘Q’ liaison officer in British Army Headquarters (Palestine and Transjordan) allowed him to meet most of the commanders and see at first hand most of the formations taking part. It is this personal touch that brings the recollections to life and makes them a valuable contemporary account of events. Almost in passing he gives us some glimpses of what must have been some pretty hair-raising personal experiences, including a remarkable journey alone across the desert to join Habforce, with the ever present risk of attack from marauding Arabs.

But the focus is on the campaign against the Vichy French in Lebanon and Syria. He reminds us that ‘The AIF and the people of Australia have much to be proud about this period in the Middle East’, and indeed we do. The conditions under which the campaign was fought were appalling. It was in the mid summer heat and sandstorms of June and July (unlike the 1991 Operation Desert Storm which was fought in the cool months), and the Australian forces were short of just about everything. He recalls ‘... the very good troops of 7 Aust Div, who had to fight in dreadful conditions of terrain with no air cover, and inferior equipment, no tanks, no modern or heavy artillery, no heavy AA guns and a general lack of heavy transport and engineer equipment’. May we never again commit troops to battle under such limitations.

There are important glimpses of the problems of command in coalition warfare, and the continual business of keeping the AIF operating as intact as possible under the British High Command led by the 18 stone General ‘Jumbo’ Wilson. John Buckley has little time for Wilson who was forever looking to complain about Australian troops’ behaviour, and who was reluctant to pass control of the battle to 1 Aust Corps, until, as Rowell forecast, ‘... it got into a very bad mess’.

I personally found the account of Habforce’s operations most interesting, particularly in the light of the recent operations. Habforce was essentially a brigade group including the Household Cavalry which in a brilliant series of actions in mid summer fought its way from the Mediterranean across the Syrian and Iraqi deserts to Baghdad in May 41 to quell the ‘rebellion’ and then back again to take part in the campaign against the French.

There is much of interest here to the military professional, and the whole is much enlivened by John Buckley’s personal account of events as he saw them, interspersed with some very amusing anecdotes. This is another fine contribution to the Australian Defence Force Journal by Colonel Buckley, and I sincerely hope it will not be the last.

P.C. Gration
General
Chief of the Defence Force
INTRODUCTION

May 1991 is the 50th Anniversary of the capture of Iraq by the British Army. June 1991 is the 50th Anniversary of the Battle for Syria and Lebanon, in which Australian troops were to play a major role. Other than Long’s Greece, Crete and Syria, in the series of Official Military History, little has been written about Lebanon and Syria, which in spite of the optimism of Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff, turned out to be a short, but very strongly contested operation against a formidable, more numerous and much better equipped Vichy French enemy.

For the duration of the campaign I served in the British Army HQ, Palestine and Transjordan and have been asked to write some of my recollections of that period. On more than one occasion it looked as if the enemy would repel the Force which had been hastily put together with a mixture of Australian, British, Indian, Free French and some Transjordan units. Its equipment situation was deplorable. The Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell, had a most unenviable burden trying to deploy forces which were very sparse throughout his Command. Briefly, his troops were mopping up in Abyssinia; Greece had gone, and Crete was about to fall; the Western Desert was due to erupt; 9th Australian Division was under siege in Tobruk, and Wavell was being pressed to invade Syria and to deal with the rebellion in Iraq, which was a classic British effort.

All of his available formations were deployed except for the 7th Australian Division which was in reserve at Mersa Matruh. Some formations had lost all of their heavy equipment, transport and guns before evacuation from Greece (eg. 6th Australian Division and Corps troops). Churchill continued to press and harass Wavell about the Syrian attack, even before the evacuation of Crete. Churchill continued to press and harass Wavell about the Syrian attack, even before the evacuation of Crete. There was also the complication that General de Gaulle, as usual, was being difficult and demanding that the small Free French Force be used to invade Syria—it would have been a disaster if they had done so on their own. Wavell delayed his planning to enter Syria in the hope that, somehow or other, significant reinforcements would eventuate. Some new and urgent crises developed with regular monotony. Wavell had a dreadful time trying to cope with the overbearing Churchill.

It was thought that when the Germans had captured Crete, they would make an airborne attack on Syria, the capture of which would give them the feasibility of a two-pronged attack on the Suez Canal and open the Iran and Iraq oilfields for exploitation. In fact, German aircraft had been sighted on several of the main Syrian military aerodromes, where they refuelled on their way to Iraq, which was about to rebel, prompted by German encouragement to Prime Minister Raschid Ali.

It will be recalled that France held Syria and Lebanon under a League of Nations mandate. The population of both countries at the time was about 3,500,000 made up a diverse population of religious and cultural communities, who found it almost impossible to live adjacent to each other, they still do! Because of its coastal mountain ranges and the desert beyond Damascus, Lebanon and Syria were easy to defend—a fact overlooked by Churchill and his military advisers in London, and indeed the Vichy French soldiers made up of crack Foreign Legion and Colonial troops, would steadfastly defend Syria with dedication and determination. In particular they detested and loathed the Free French troops—when they clashed later, no quarter was given or expected. There were about 35,000 Vichy soldiers in Syria and they were well equipped, trained and led.

At this stage, I should mention that Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq were held under a League of Nations mandate by Great Britain. Therefore, the two major powers in the area were the British and French. Local people in these mandates were most resentful of the occupying powers and there were periodic revolts in all of the countries. Strong British and French military, air and naval forces occupied the mandates, even before WWII. General Dentz was the Commander-in-Charge of the Vichy French Forces defending Lebanon and Syria. As it turned out, he was a difficult person to deal with, and under orders from Vichy, he was only too eager to allow the Germans concessions and rights of transit. Not so to the British!

Finally, Wavell could not hold out against the demands of Churchill, who appeared to display little understanding of the burdens Wavell was carrying. In retrospect, Wavell deserves commendation for his never ending effort in meeting adversity against great odds. Lieutenant General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson (later Field
Marshall Lord Wilson) was appointed GOC Palestine and Transjordan (later the 9th Army) with Headquarters in the famous King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Wilson had been GOC Greece. He was not known for his ability as a leader, and at times, had a condescending attitude towards Australian Commanders, many of whom were at least his equal or maybe better, in military expertise (ie., Blamey and Lavarack).

He was ever on the lookout to find reasons to complain about the AIF troops behaviour—and, believe it or not, in some instances, he was justified! Wilson was a huge man, known as 'Jumbo'. His appointment to command Palestine and Transjordan was a signal that Syria was to be invaded to prevent the German build up in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. It became clear also that the AIF would play a major role in the battle for Syria and adjacent countries. It had done so in the Western Desert, Greece and Crete, where the 6th and 9th Australian Divisions had performed with great distinction. The 7th Australian Division was about to be tested in battle. It was to perform with equal distinction.

PART ONE

The Situation of the 1st Australian Corps HQ in May 1941

Early in May, 1941, after the evacuation from Greece and Crete, the Headquarters of the 1st Australian Corps was located at Deir Suni in Palestine.

The AIF had taken a very bad mauling in Greece and Crete and had lost all of its artillery, vehicles, signal and engineering equipment and stores. Needless to say morale was low. I joined the HQ 1 Australian Corps Headquarters staff a few days after its return from Greece, having been with HQ 8th Australian Division, and left them to join HQ 9th Division, but as the latter was under siege in Tobruk, I was posted to HQ 1 Australian Corps. When I reported to Brigadier W. Bridgeford (DA & QMG, later Lieutenant General Sir William) he told me my first job was to take the Headquarters NCOs and other ranks on a five day hike around Palestine, so that they would have a break after their experiences.
in Greece, where they had been dive bombed without let up.

Some of the troops were restless and stressed. Brigadier Bridgeford suggested that we should spend a day in Jerusalem, and then to follow the border with Syria and Transjordan as closely as possible. Later, I was to realise the importance of this direction when the invasion of Syria and Lebanon eventuated. We camped at Nazareth, Tiberias (Sea of Galilee), Safad and Haifa, so we were able to see the main roads to Lebanon and Syria, which were selected as the points of entry when the invasion started.

During this journey around Palestine, my assistants were two officers, members of the Intelligence Section, and Padre Bullbeck, Senior Anglican Chaplain. The latter was a success, as he was able to answer all of the questions about the Holy Land. The first night in Jerusalem was the only night we had accommodation and we stayed at the Fast Hotel where Major Eugene Gorman QC (later Brigadier) was the manager. Brigadier Harold Cohen, the Red Cross Commissioner, was there at the same time. Although too old for active service, Harold was determined to be of service to the AIF. His son, Captain Eddie Cohen (later Sir Edward) was serving in the 2/12th Field Regiment.

I had no trouble keeping the troops together—they were happy to have the Padre as their guide in the Holy City. He was able to explain the significance of Jerusalem, Nazareth, Sea of Galilee and other important Christian areas. I had half expected some behaviour problems, but there was only one incident at Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, that caused any concern. It was the troops’ holiday, so I decided that the officers would do guard duty while the boys went into town for the night life. We had camped under some olive trees and at about midnight, hearing loud voices approaching, I got out of my sleeping bag to be greeted by a number of men.

‘It wasn’t us, Sir it was those bloody Cheshire Yeomanry—they attacked us in the cafe, then smashed the bloody place up. When the bloody Pommy red caps arrived, we got the blame, so we told them to ‘piss off’ or we would throw them into the Sea of Galilee. Then we decided to come and tell you the story so that you would know that we were innocent’.

I decided to leave Tiberias before dawn on the following morning with no forwarding address! On that same day, Captain Bobby Lewis was scouting to find a suitable place to camp near Atlit Castle (a legacy from the Crusaders). Outside Haifa, a bull charged his motor cycle with unhappy results—however, all turned out well in the end, except for the motor cycle.

This trip was to give me a ‘flying start’ on the outbreak of hostilities. I knew the main roads from Palestine into Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon and Iraq. More importantly, I had an understanding of the difficult mountain ranges on the borders and the flat desert approaches to Iraq. Little did I know at the time that within a matter of weeks I would be making frequent long trips over those countries whilst attached to British Army HQ (Palestine and Transjordan).

On return to Corps HQ 1 Australian at Deir Suneid it was clear that our equipment situation could not be worse. We had one Bren gun for the HQ Defence platoon, but it did not have a breech block, and none was available, short of Egypt hundreds of miles away. A few motor bikes were made available, all officers up to Colonel had to be able to ride. However, this resulted in an unacceptable series of injuries, and the BGS Brigadier Rowell (later Lieutenant General Sir Sydney Rowell) had to cancel the order. For urgent visits to Corps units we were able sometimes to hire a local Arab taxi.

At this time, General Blamey was Deputy Commander-in-Chief Middle East, GOC AIF HQ, and GOC 1 Australian Corps. In the first two appointments he was based in Cairo, so it was left to the BGS and the DA & QMG to run Corps-HQ at Deir Sureid, a situation which would create problems if the Corps was given an operational task. And create them it did (more about that later).

**CORPS HQ STAFF**

1st Australian Corps HQ at this time had a most talented Staff:

- **BGS**: Brigadier Sydney Rowell—later Lieutenant General Sir Sydney Rowell, Director of Tactical Investigation at the War Office;
- Chief of the General Staff, Australia;
DA & QMG Brigadier William Bridgeford later
Commander-in-Chief, BCOF Japan,
(Lieutenant General Sir William);
Chief Executive Officer of the 1956
Olympic Games in Melbourne;

Lieutenant Colonel Henry Wells,
Liaison—later Chief of the General
Staff, and the first full-time Chief of
the Defence Staff in the Department
of Defence (Lieutenant General Sir
Henry Wells);

Major Ragnar Garrett, Staff
—later Chief of the General Staff
(Lieutenant General Sir Ragnar
Garrett);

Lieutenant Colonel Eric Woodward,
Q Staff—later GOC Eastern
Command, and Governor of New
South Wales (Lieutenant General Sir
Eric);

Brigadier Clive Steele—later
Engineer-in-Chief, Major General Sir
Clive Steele;
Brigadier Colin Simpson, Chief Signals Officer—later Major-General Colin Simpson;
Brigadier Cyril Clowes CCRA—later GOC Milne Bay Force and GOC Southern Command (Lieutenant General Clowes).

There were many other officers serving on the Corps HQ who were to gain high rank during and after WWII. Some became Captains of industry, top public servants and senior diplomatic representatives.

PLANNING FOR SYRIA

Wavell was getting very concerned about the influence of de Gaulle and Catroux (de Gaulle’s representative in the Middle East) on Churchill. He told the Chiefs of Staff in London that if military policy in the Middle East was to be dictated by de Gaulle it would be better to remove him [Wavell] from his command. Full marks to Wavell as de Gaulle was a problem. This brought a nasty reply from Churchill, inter alia:

‘... for the decision we take full responsibility, and should you find yourself unwilling to give effect to it, arrangements will be made to meet any wish you may express to be relieved of your Command’.

On 27 May, 1941, the Defence Committee in London, instructed Wavell that his first objective must be a success in the Western Desert, but that Syria must be occupied before the German Air Force had recovered from its losses in Crete. It was left to Wavell to select the date of the invasion, but ‘... it was to be soon...’ said the London experts! Under these clear directions Wavell, although convinced of the danger, bearing in mind the sparsity of his resources, had no alternative but to set a date for the invasion.

There were three main road systems leading from Palestine into Syria and Lebanon. They were:
The coastal road which rose from about sea level at Haifa to the high cliffs on the border at Ras en Naqoura, was a narrow coastal ledge, in places like the worst part of the of the Great Ocean Road near Lorne, Victoria. Further into Lebanon there were two long tunnels. It was an easy road to defend either by demolition or by strong points and offered some magnificent scenery;

The centre axis led from Metulla and Banias into the high valley between the Lebanon mountains, Mount Hermon, and the Anti-Lebanon mountains in the east. The Litani river flows in this valley before turning to enter the Mediterranean between Tyre and Sidon; and

The third point of entry was from Jisr Bennt Jacub (Bridge of the daughters of Jacob) through Kuneitra which led to Damascus. These roads were very easy to defend.

From Deraa, on the Transjordan border, two roads led to Sheikh, Meskine and Ezraa. The railway line from Haifa to Damascus, Beirut, Homs, Hama and Aleppo also passed through Deraa. The country in this area is rocky desert, flat with occasional oases and was sparsely populated.

Wavell decided that the main composition of the invading force would be the 7th Australian Division, not tried in battle. This was the third successive time that the Australians were to be in the forefront of the battles in the Middle East: in the Western Desert, Greece and Crete and now Syria and Lebanon. The AIF and the Australian people have much to be proud about this period in the Middle East. Later was to follow that magnificent fighting at El Alamein by the 9th Australian Division.

Major General Lavarack GOC 7th Australian Division was called from Mersa Matruh to receive his instructions from GHQ Cairo and from General Blamey, Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Middle East. The 7th Australian Division was still short of a Brigade. Lavarack requested that 2/3 and 2/5 Battalions from the 6th Australian Division be placed under his command. This was agreed although the 6th Division was still being reconstituted after the losses in Greece.

At this time, HQ 1 Australian Corps at Deir Suneid was not aware of the proposal to use the 7th Australian Division in Syria, nor was it told that it would have a role in the operation. Corps HQ still did not have a resident commander. Brigadiers Rowell and Bridgeford were bridging the gap whilst Blamey pondered over giving the command to Lavarack. Rowell had made strong representations that Lavarack should be appointed. Late one night, in the middle of May, Lavarack and Colonel John Chapman, Gl 7th Australia Division arrived at Deir Suneid to call on Rowell who was very surprised to see them so far away from 7th Australian Division HQ at Mersa Matruh. Lavarack said, "Don't you know why we are here?" Rowell replied, 'I haven't a clue.' He was then told for the first time that 7th Australian Division was to be the major force pitted against the Vichy French in Syria. Lavarack then went on to have discussions with 'Jumbo' Wilson at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem (Army HQ for Palestine and Transjordan).

Brigadier Rowell was most concerned when he heard that the invasion force was to be commanded from Jerusalem. He made strong recommendations to Jerusalem that HQ 1 Australian Corps should be interposed, as the gap between the forward troops and AHQ P & TJ was too far. General Wilson countered by saying that 1 Australian Corps HQ and its troops had no transport and no signal communication. Not to be daunted, Rowell stated that they could be overcome by an allocation of priority. Rowell also made representation to Blamey and senior staff officers at GHQ Middle East in Cairo. (Full Circle by S.F.Rowell). After
some consideration, it was agreed that HQ 1 Australian Corps would take over control of the operation when the major cities had been captured (ie. Damascus and Beirut, together with the major military aerodrome at Rayak). Rowell told Blarney that the hand over would take place much earlier, especially when the operations got into a mess, as it most assuredly would. He was right, but it happened sooner than expected. The Vichy French strong counter attack surprised HQ P & TJ.

7TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION
ARRIVAL IN PALESTINE

During the earlier discussions between Wilson and Lavarack, whilst 7th Australian Division was still at Mersa Matruh, Lavarack had great difficulty in getting a firm Order of Battle. In fact, the Division did not arrive until a few days before the invasion.

Although the 8 June, 1941 was set as the time the AIF crossed the Syrian Border, bits and pieces of units were being added or deleted for the duration of the battle. Lavarack was most unhappy that no heavy tanks or heavy anti-aircraft artillery was to be provided, and motor transport and engineer equipment were extremely limited. Air support was insignificant. On 5 June 1941, Lavarack was given instructions that he would become Commander of HQ 1 Australian Corps when the line of Beirut, Rayak and Damascus was reached, and Brigadier Allen of 16 Brigade would become GOC 7th Australian Division.

HQ STAFF 7TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION

Like HQ 1 Australian Corps, the Divisional HQ included a talented group of Officers, which included:

GOC Major General J. D. Lavarack—(later Lieutenant General Sir John), who had been CGS in Australia for four years. He dropped rank to command the 7th Australian Division. Later he was to become Governor of Queensland;

ADMS Colonel F. Norris—(later Major General Sir Frank);

AA & QMG Colonel V. C. Secombe—(later Lieutenant General);

G Staff Major R. Pollard—(later Lieutenant General Sir Reginald and CGS);

Q Staff Major L. G. Canet—(later Major General);

CRA Brigadier F. Berryman—(later Lieutenant General Sir Frank);

BMRA Major J. Wilton—(later General Sir John CGS and CDFS);

BMRA(L) Major J. Harrison—(later Major General Sir James, Governor of South Australia);

25th Australian Brigade
Divisional Troops:
6 Div Cav 2/2 Anti-Tk 2/2 Pioneer Bn
2/4 Fd Regt 2/3 Bn 2/5, 216, 2/9, Fd Coys
2/5 Fd Regt 2/5 Bn 7 Div Sigs

GHQ ORDER OF BATTLE FOR SYRIA

On ‘D’ day the British Order of Battle included:

7th Australian Division HQ Major General Lavarack;
21st Australian Brigade Brigadier Stevens (2/14, 2/16, 2/27 Bns); and
25th Australian Brigade Brigadier Baxter-Cox (2/25, 2/31, 2/33 Bns).

Divisional Troops:
6 Div Cav 2/2 Anti-Tk 2/2 Pioneer Bn
2/4 Fd Regt 2/3 Bn 2/5, 216, 2/9, Fd Coys
2/5 Fd Regt 2/5 Bn 7 Div Sigs
Air Commodore L. O. Brown, Major General J. D. Lavarack, Lieutenant General H. Maitland Wilson and General Catroux. (AWM)

2/6 Fd Regt 2/3 MG Bn 2/2 AFW
Med Units S & T Units Ord Unit

Later HQ 1 Australian Corps, some Corps troops and others joined the battle.

**5th Indian Brigade Group**—Brigadier W. Lloyd Royal Fusiliers 3/1 Punjab 4/6 Rajput Rifles 1 Fd Regt
plus other RA Arms and Services. A very capable and well led fighting Brigade.

**Free French Division**—General Legentilhomme

A skeleton division poorly equipped, mostly transported in civilian type buses. Indian and British units made it easy for the French to take over for the entry into Damascus. Later "Habforce" from Iraq; 10th Indian Division (GOC Slim) from Iraq, 6th British Division (GOC Jack Evetts); Arab Legion, TJFF (Transjordan Frontier Force) and some British Cavalry Units joined the campaign.

Brigadier Rowell showed great initiative in making sure that HQ 1 Australian Corps would be completely in the picture when it took over from HQ P & TJ the direction of the Force. He made arrangements for the HQ 1 Australian Corps, to move from Deir Suneid to Nazareth on the day the invasion commenced. Although AHQ (P & TJ) refused to make any transport available for the move, and Corps had none of its own, Rowell was able to get the Palestine Police Force to provide buses to get the corps to the olive grove just out of Nazareth, well placed for the command of forces fighting in Syria.

At this time HQ 1st Australian Corps had no responsibility for the campaign, but Rowell and Bridgeford were determined to 'horn in' so that they knew what forces were involved and what was going on. As Rowell stated 'so that we would know the day to day situation first hand, Liaison and Staff officers were sent out as if the battle belonged to us.
...we had a daily conference to ensure that we were all in the picture. (Full Circle by S.F.Rowell)

ATTACHED TO HQ (P & TJ)

On 9 June, Brigadier Bridgeford told me to go to AHQ P & TJ in Jerusalem and to report to Colonel Q. At the time I was a Major. I was to remain under control of the HQ until the end of the campaign. I would be required probably to do liaison duties with ‘Habforce’ (which had captured Iraq), Arab Legion, TJFF and any force from India and Iraq coming up the Euphrates River. Also, it may be necessary to contact the 5th Indian Brigade and any British Forces in the east or central sectors. However, I was attached to AHQ P & TJ and was to take my orders from that HQ, but I was to return to Corps HQ from time to time as opportunity occurred. Brigadier Bridgeford suggested that AHQ P & TJ be informed that Corps HQ did not have any cars and I should ask them for one. I was told also to wear the AHQ Armband (red, black, red) as it was important that all units knew that I was on AHQ Staff. All HQ Staff had to wear their arm bands at all times including the Australian formations.

On arrival in Jerusalem at about 14.00 hours I went to the King David Hotel, but found all the staff away—but the bar on the ground floor was open. They had recreation for several hours after lunch, but worked at night. Colonel Q turned out to be an excellent officer, he gave me a car, a Ford Pilot, with about 100,000 miles on the clock, it didn’t last long. He told me to go down to the military store in the city, and buy myself a red, black, red armband, which would be important for my ‘prestige’ when I went out to join Indian and British Regiments in Iraq and in northern Syria.

My first job was to go to the HQ Arab Legion (Colonel John Glubb, later Lieutenant General Sir John Glubb, or Glubb Pasha), then to HQ Transjordan Frontier Force and to the 5th Indian Brigade at Deraa or Ezraa. However, I returned to Corps HQ to report to Brigadier Bridgeford and Colonel Jillet before taking up my attachment with the British. I should point out that at this stage communication was most difficult between all units serving in Syria and Lebanon. This was very apparent with the two major forces coming from Iraq to join in the battle ‘Habforce’ and the 10th Indian Division. The frightful sand storms, high winds, extremely high temperatures together with the buffeting of equipment on vehicles played havoc with wireless transmission and reception. More importantly there was very little signals equipment available anywhere. Hence, the importance of liaison officers became apparent. Before giving details of my visits to the units mentioned above, I will cover the important account of the start of the invasion by 7th Australian Division, 5th Indian Brigade and the Free French.

PART TWO

The Battle Commences — 8 June 1941

The roads for the advance of the 7th Australian Division were widely separated. Therefore, the Brigade Commanders had more responsibility in controlling their supplemented Brigades, on a very wide front in the most difficult conditions of terrain. All points of entry into Syria were easy to defend by a resolute foe, and the Vichites were certainly resolute. In particular, Brigadier Stevens (21st Brigade) had a most difficult problem on the left axis because it was easy to cut the narrow cliff roads and the numerous bridges on the coastal road to Beirut. In fact his fears were realised because the bridge over Litani (17 miles from the border) and the demolition of the road at Iskandaroun, made rapid progress difficult. Some of the ‘bright’ staff at HQ2 (P & TJ) thought the Brigade would be able to drive through to Beirut on the first day. The Australians knew otherwise and the early events proved them right. The 25th Brigade under Baxter-Cox, found similar problems on the right of 21st Brigade. It became clear on the first day that it was to be a hard slogging battle against a highly motivated and capable enemy who was not prepared to surrender an inch of ground without a bloody and determined fight.

There was little, or insignificant air cover, in fact, any plane in the air could be regarded as Vichy French. By dividing the Syrian force into three columns and later five, Wilson reduced the possibility of reaching a quick decision in the battle. The three columns on ‘D’ day were approximately the same strength (as were Habforce and the 10th Indian Division later). The 21st Brigade performed with great dash, Jackie Stevens was everywhere,
pushing his Brigade from a Bren gun carrier. Likewise, the 25th Brigade proved its fighting ability under Baxter-Cox and gave a very good account of itself. At the end of the first day, it was crystal clear that Syria would have to be won by sound military expertise and strength. Political strategy would have little influence on the campaign.

The British Commando unit, which was to land in support of 21 Brigade, was handicapped by weather and later landed in the wrong place. It is of interest to note that Major G. C. Keyes VC MC, son of Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Keyes, was with the Special Services during the operation. Their job was to assist in preventing the destruction of the bridge over the Litani River, just before it enters the sea. Unfortunately, the bridge was blown. However, boats were used by 2/16 Battalion to cross the river under determined and accurate fire. Between the bridge and the sea, the area was covered by banana and other fruit plantations which afforded some protection to the advancing troops.

I do not intend to cover the operations of battalions, as Long's Official History (1953) gives detailed accounts of operations, in some cases down to personal contributions. Also, several unit histories are most valuable in covering the course of the campaign, eg. Bill Russell's 2/14 Battalion, Jim McAllister's Men of the 2114 Battalion, and John Bellair's 213 MG Battalion, to mention only a few.

French destroyers appeared off the coast and began shelling the AIF, but the 2/4 Field Regiment drove them off with accurate fire. On the third axis of advance the 5th Indian Brigade fought with great determination and had taken Sheik Meskine, Ezraa, Kuneitra and Deraa. The Brigade had done its task rapidly and had captured over 30 officers and 350 other ranks. Brigadier Lloyd decided to remain in the town managed to let the Free French into the battle. With encouragement and some assistance they made slow progress towards Kiswe. During this advance some Free French Circassian cavalry were used in the volcanic, rocky country. Their Commanding Officer, Colonel Collet, was one of the better French officers. In summary, some significant advance had been made on the left, little real progress had been made and the troops were bogged down. On the right the 5th Indian Brigade had made considerable progress. The Free French, with the 5th Indian Brigade protecting their rear, had advanced.

ADVANCING ON SIDON, MERDJAYOUN, JEZZINE AND KISWE

The 21st Australian Brigade was hell bent on getting to Sidon, but Stevens was ordered not to destroy some of its ancient and historical buildings such as the Crusader's Castle. This was a common approach by all Commanders during the campaign, with the result that no damage was done to the large number of Crusader Castles and world famous ruins, such as Baalbek and Palmyra. Nor, in fact, was any real damage done to Beirut, Tripoli, Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama. The battalions of the 21st Australian Brigade and their supporting troops battled their way to Sidon. There were some strongly defended strong points to overcome. On 15 June, 1941, Sidon was captured and Jackie Stevens entered the town and took over from the civil authorities and proclaimed martial law. The Vichy French had withdrawn to a point about halfway between Sidon and Damour.

On a lighter note, Jim McAllister had made available the following story written by Corporal E.H. Roberts (Corporal Lew Waller who was KIA in Papua New Guinea after returning from the Middle East, is the Lew mentioned in this story).

'Late in 1940 Brigadier J.E.S. Stevens, who was in command of 21st Brigade, was concerned at the over-use, by the troops, of filthy language, and published a Brigade Routine order asking the troops to refrain from the use of what he delicately tried to describe as the 'playground word' and the 'in and out word'.

It had precisely no effect, of course. Some months later we were in action in Syria and during a short lull in the proceedings, caused by our fellows on the right flank being held up by enemy machine gun posts, those of us on the left flank took advantage of the opportunity to rip off our clothes and take a quick wash in the sea. We were along the coast between Litani River and Saide. We lay in the sun drying off because the Army did not supply suitable bathing equipment for troops in action, when up came a Bren carrier carrying somebody who started shouting rude epithets at us.

One of our blokes, Lew, passed a remark in reply which seemed to be perfectly reasonable in the circumstances, after all we had been having a rough time for the past week or so. 'Take no notice of him, he is just some mug Captain
bastard.' Up stood the Brigadier, purple in the face, purple I tell you. 'I am no mug Captain bastard, I am the ....ing Brigadier', he screamed, using one of his own forbidden words. Lew was not the least bit impressed as it was not to be expected that the Brigadier would turn up right at the front line where the real war was only 100 yards or so away. 'Well', said Lew, 'if you are the ....ing Brigadier, you have no ....ing right to be up here so .... off!' I heard the explosion but I don't know what was said. I grabbed my pants, shirt, tommy gun and sundry impediments and fled toward the enemy as I felt that it would be much safer over there.

Years later I saw the Brigadier, who by now was Major General Sir Jack Stevens, in Collins Street, Melbourne and raised my hat. We wore hats in those days and I was just paying a normal courtesy. He stopped and we chatted a little and he enquired after my old unit. 'I must tell you a funny story about the 2/14th Battalion', he said, 'I have often told it but for some reason no one believes me'. You've guessed it, he told me the story as I have told it to you. I laughed and told him that not only did I believe every word, but I could also vouch for the veracity of it. ‘You weren’t that long skinny fellow with the bare arse that I saw running toward the enemy?’ ‘I was’, said Roberts.

CENTRAL SECTOR

On the central sector, progress was slow, it was the most strongly defended area at the time, it didn’t last long and Merdjayoun was taken. At the formal surrender, Major General Allen, Brigadiers Berryman and Baxter-Cox were present. Rose petals were thrown over the victors. The 25th Australian Brigade was directed to move quickly along the winding road to Jezzine, which was taken at about 20.00 hours. In front with the troops was Brigadier Frank Berryman, a great staff officer and later a great commander. At this period the Greys and the Cheshire Yeomanry were with the Australians. Soon the Vichy French would counterattack, and most of the gains would be lost. Berryman's habit of wearing his red hat in the forward area was not appreciated by the troops as it brought the 'crabs'.

RIGHT SECTOR

The Free French forces were meeting with stiffened resistance and Vichy tanks were being used with success. General Legentilhomme had trouble in getting his troops to stand firm. At this stage General Wilson ordered the 5th Indian Brigade under the Free French command to renew the attack. The Transjordan Frontier Force was used to protect the Line of Communications. I saw much of this small unit, about 700 strong, during the campaign and it performed well. The attack met with stiff opposition before Sassa and fell back. Except for the 21st Australian Brigade area little progress had been made, and even it had to be halted to provide help elsewhere. Wavell decided that the 16th British Brigade Group of the 6th British Division should be sent from Egypt to Syria. There were bits and pieces of formations and units scattered everywhere. No wonder Sir Thomas Blamey always tried to keep the Australian formation intact. Even when I went out into Iraq I found a troop of Australian Anti Tank guns attached to Habforce.

FRENCH COUNTER ATTACK

At this stage the Allied forces were within 30 miles of Beirut (Stevens), 25 miles from Damascus (Lloyd and Free French), and central sector (Baxter-Cox), only ten miles over the Palestine border. Now the Vichy French hit back hard and solid in the Merdjayoun-Jezzine area, so much so, that there was now a withdrawal on the whole centre front, except at Jezzine. The chaos is well described in the Official History (Long 1953), and in some Unit Histories. A few mistakes were made by some of the battalion commanders, but the troops fought with great determination and stamina. They were not going to let the 'bloody Frogs' kick them back into Palestine.

One of the important things that I remember about the whole campaign was the very good troops of the 7th Australian Division, who had to fight in dreadful conditions of terrain with no air cover, inferior equipment, no tanks, no medium or heavy artillery, no heavy guns, and a general lack of heavy
transport and engineering equipment. The mountainous terrain was ideal for the defenders.

**TRANSFIGURATION**

Mount Hermon, which plays such an important part in biblical history dominates the skyline. The roads below on either side of the mountain, its foothills and the small towns were fought for by the Australians, Indians, Free French and British on their drive to Beirut and Damascus. It was the scene of some bloody fighting. Many authorities believe that the 'Transfiguration' of Jesus occurred on the slopes of Mount Hermon, during the withdrawal into parts of 'Caesarea Phillippi' where he took the disciples: Peter, James and John.

'There His raiment became shining, exceedingly white as snow ... and there appeared unto them Elijah and Moses: and they were talking with Jesus ... there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud saying, ‘This is my beloved son, hear him.’ And suddenly when they looked about, they saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves'.

H.V. Morton in his *Steps of the Master* gives a most excellent description of Mount Hermon and its place in Christianity. Readers will be aware of the Transfiguration details set out in Matthew 17, Mark 9 and Luke 9. It may surprise some readers that several of our generals in the Middle East always carried their bibles with them. For example, Herring, Steele and Simpson and there were others. On occasions they sent despatches quoting a biblical reference to give information. I am aware that some authorities state the 'Transfiguration' took place at Mount Tabor (1,700 feet) which is a small hill near Nazareth. Some AIF units camped near there before the Syrian campaign commenced.

The situation at Merdjayoun became so serious that Lavarack ordered reinforcements be sent there
with urgency. Brigadier Berryman was instructed to take command of all troops in the area including 2/25 and 2/33 Battalions, 2/3 MG Battalion, 2/2 Pioneer Battalion and others. Stevens was ordered to stand fast in the coastal sector. In the Official History (Long 1953) pages 408 and following pages, gives a very good description of the recapture of Merdjayoun. It includes the Order issued by Major John Wilton (later General Sir John Wilton, Chief Defence Force Staff).

**CHANGE IN COMMAND**

Rowell's forecast that HQ 1 Australian Corps would be given responsibility for controlling the battle when it got into a very bad mess, occurred after the successful Vichy French counter-attacks. On 18 June, Lavarack handed over the 7th Australian Division HQ to Major General 'Tubby' Allen. Lavarack was promoted to Corps Commander, with the rank of Lieutenant General: The eighteen stone 'Jumbo' Wilson, still maintaining strategic control at his AHQ P & TJ in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

Blamey, during his visit to the front, decided that Damascus should be taken as a priority. He discussed this with Lavarack and Major General Jack Evetts, commanding the 6th British Division and Free French troops facing Damascus. All agreed, so Blamey hurried back to Jerusalem, arriving about midnight. It took some time for Blamey to bully the reluctant staff to awaken Wilson; he told Wilson to give the order for the change in priority. Wilson said that he would give the order 'in the morning'. Blamey lost his temper and told Wilson to do it now', otherwise valuable Australian lives would be lost. As Norman Carlyon wrote in his book, 'I Remember Blamey ... 'it was strange to see the short stocky Blamey standing over the mountainous 'Jumbo' Wilson.' The outcome of the order was that Damascus fell quickly, I will refer back to this later.

**PART THREE**

**Habforce and the 10th Indian Division**

It is necessary now, in order to observe continuity, to give details of the other two columns advancing from Iraq, Habforce, which had been sent from Palestine to quell the rebellion in Iraq when Raschid Ali, the Prime Minister, who was very much under German influence, took control of Baghdad and tried to capture the RAF Station at Habbaniya. The advance of Habforce across the Syrian and Iraq deserts to relieve Baghdad was a classic campaign. It is remarkable how the force, which consisted of the 4th Cavalry Brigade and supporting troops, 1st Battalion Essex, Warwickshire Yeomanry, Wiltshire Yeomanry and Arab Legion were able to defeat the Iraqis, it was mainly 'bluff'.

The main component of the column was the Household Cavalry who had lost their horses and became Infantry transported by motor trucks. Habforce was under the Command of Major General J. G. Clark (Later Lieutenant General) and the Brigade Commander was Brigadier Joe Kingstone, a very fine and courageous soldier. On June 13, 1941, Clark was ordered to move into Syria, occupying Palmyra and cut the Damascus road to Homs. The Habforce units at this date were based at Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul and many other points.

The move into Syria was made possible by the availability of the 10th Indian Division to take over Habforce areas of responsibility. It was amazing that Clark was able to concentrate his force at H3 pumping station on the Haifa section of the pipeline by 17 June, 1941. H3 was 140 miles south east of Palmyra. In explanation, the crude oil supplies from Iraq were delivered by pipeline to Haifa in Palestine and Tripoli in Syria. The long distance of the pipeline necessitated pumping stations at places approximately 100 miles apart. These stations were numbered from Haditha in Iraq, Haifa, H1... HS and Tripoli T1... T4. A sealed narrow road was adjacent to the pipelines and some accommodation was available at each plant. In order to confuse the enemy, Clark allotted a small force at T1 in the hope that the Vichy defenders would believe that his attack would use the road alongside the Euphrates River. The country in this area was flat, rocky desert and most difficult for any type of transport except for a few very rough unsealed roads. It was terribly hot in the daytime and during the night it was freezing, there was no water except at the pumping plants. The only living things appeared to be scorpions.

I now intend to give some of my recollections of liaison with the 5th Indian Brigade, Habforce and the 10th Indian Division. In accordance with instructions from HQ P & TJ, I set out alone to
contact the 5th Indian Brigade in the areas of Deraa, Kuneitra, Ezrael, Sheikh Miskene in Syria near the Transjordan border. Under Brigadier W. Lloyd, the Brigade had made fast progress in capturing its objectives. It had all the hallmarks of being a well experienced fighting machine. It was later to take a pounding on the advance to Damascus, not getting much help from the Free French, who in the later stages had to be coaxed to move forward. Their Commanding Officer, in this staff car adjacent to the front line troops, urging them on. Some claim that the Commanding Officer had a female soldier driving his car.

At Deraa, I first saw the 5th Brigade in action against a determined Vichy aircraft bomber attack. A long train loaded with ammunition and petrol from Haifa had just pulled into the railway station. Suddenly all hell was let loose as the Vichy bombers had a series of direct hits. I took cover behind a stone wall and watched the Indians with MGs on tripods, stand in an open area beside the station, machine gunning the planes as they dived at them. Nothing could deter the Indians, several were wounded or killed, but they had the satisfaction of shooting down one of the planes. It crashed in a ball of fire just short of the train which was blowing up in a rapid series of explosions, nothing was left of the train’s load of ammunition or the railway station.

I visited the Royal Fusiliers at Kuneitra. Later they were to be caught in a fierce Vichy French counter-attack and because of lack of ammunition and food, had to surrender. They had no hope of holding out against a very superior tank and infantry force. It was the same story over all fronts. There was no air support and no adequate armour to fight the Vichy tanks. In addition, there was not enough transport, no suitable anti tank or aircraft weapons, and shortages of petrol. Engineering equipment was limited and there was not enough signal and communication facilities, these were just some of the problems.

I set out from Deraa across the desert to contact ‘Kingcol’ (part of Habforce), so named after its commander, Brigadier Joe Kingstone, which I understood were somewhere near the oil pipeline at H3 in Iraq where they were concentrating before moving on Palmyra. On reaching H5, I was asked to take two Arab Legion soldiers to H4 to rejoin their unit. It was the first time I had seen these picturesque soldiers in long flowing dress with red
Australians examining a crashed and badly-damaged Vichy plane at Aleppo. (AWM 11449)

An Australian patrol of the 7th Cavalry Regiment in Northern Syria. (AWM 8589)
inserts. Because of their colourful uniform, they were known as ‘Glubbs Girls’—a fierce, tempestuous and very excitable lot. At H4 they got out of the back seat and disappeared quickly as I drove off. Miles down the track, I looked in the back and found that they had pinched all of my maps, including those of Palmyra and the desert across to Deir-ez-Zor. I was not amused. I told Glubb when I first met him shortly after. Glubb was a short man, had a rather bad face wound near his chin, easy to talk to, was at home with his troops and did not like to hear any criticism of them. He did not stay around Habforce and seemed to disappear into the desert, presumable with his troops or back to Amman to his HQ. In addition, he had specified political responsibilities. I was looking forward to meeting up with Habforce and its elite troops, including the Life Guards and the Royal Horse Guards. They had performed a miracle in capturing Baghdad in four weeks from the time they left Nobs. Perhaps my expectations were coloured by peace time photographs I had seen of them in London. On arrival, I was taken to Brigadier Joe Kingdom, much admired by his troops. He was to be a tragic casualty later.

The Household Cavalry like the other units were transported in three ton trucks or all too few armoured cars. At this stage they had travelled from many parts of Iraq to prepare for the assault on Palmyra: a bastion in the desert, mainly held by the French Foreign Legion. It was one of the few oases between Damascus and Baghdad. After their tiring and uncomfortable journey across the desert in frequent sand storms (it was mid summer), the troops were short of most supplies: no air support or suitable armour. As transport was extremely limited, they were huddled together in the back of the trucks with little water. No one would have ever picked the force as being part of the famous Habforce and its elite troops, including the Life Guards and the Royal Horse Guards. They had performed a miracle in capturing Baghdad in four weeks from the time they left Nobs. Perhaps my expectations were coloured by peace time photographs I had seen of them in London. On arrival, I was taken to Brigadier Joe Kingdom, much admired by his troops. He was to be a tragic casualty later.

This was my first experience serving with the British Army. I enjoyed it very much, just as well, as I was to serve most of my time in Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan and Iraq with them. Likewise, for most of 1944–45 in the UK and France, Holland, Belgium and Germany with attachments to British formations in 21 Army Group. HQ; 2nd British Army HQ and 79 Armed Division. On 21 June ‘Kingcol’ left H3 with the object of taking Palmyra that day. The force included the Wiltshire Yeomanry and Warwicks. At T3 they were halted by very heavy bomber attacks. The Household Cavalry and the 1st Essex got some resistance at T2 and hardly advanced under frequent air attack. In open desert conditions, the British forces were a sitting target for accurate Vichy French aircraft. These attacks were most successful and caused a great problem. There was nowhere to shelter in the desert and remember it was mid summer and it was impossible to ‘digin’ under such dreadful conditions.

At this stage, the Arab National leader, Fawzi el Kawakji, together with some Vichy armoured cars trapped some of the supply vehicles of the force. They tricked some elements of the Habforce by coming forward with a ‘white flag’, then opening fire, causing heavy casualties. It was not the only time this had happened during the campaign in Syria and Lebanon, some very dirty fighting by the Vichy French and rebel Arabs. The heavy bombing attacks, the dreadful sandstorms with low visibility and the mid summer heat in the desert was causing terrific problems for the British forces. However, on 28 June, 3 Squadron RAAF appeared and shot down at least six enemy bombers. This improved moral immediately.

Little progress had been made on the Palmyra front except for the Arab Legion capture of Sukhna on the Palmyra, Deir-ez-Zor track. At this time, the Legion was scouting round the desert travelling at maximum speed in their utilities equipped with machine guns. They were always recognised by the speed of the sand cloud following them. If I was on my own I was always pleased to see the sand cloud disappear.

It was a very volatile situation in the desert at this time with the Vichy Light Desert Companies and the Arab National Forces under Fawzi roaming more or less at will. The desert Bedouin could not be trusted. The Arab Legion were renowned for shooting first and asking questions afterwards. At one stage, unknowingly, I was stupid enough to get behind enemy lines, but managed to get back safely. After the capture of Sukhna, Glubb claimed that the Syrian deserts were clear of the enemy. This was patently wrong as I found out very soon. Frankly, I was not impressed with the Arab Legion. Their prowess was exaggerated, but they could act like a pack of wolves as they did with a company of the Vichy French Light Desert Unit. However, they fought well at Sukhna and at Seba Biyar, about 80
miles south of Palmyra. Also they kept the desert Arabs under some form of coercion.

On 24 June, Brigadier Kingston collapsed and was succeeded by Major Gooch of the Household Cavalry (later Sir Robert Gooch, Bt DSO). The loss of Joe Kingston did little for the morale of the troops and Gooch was later to be succeeded by Brigadier J. Tiarks.

**PALMYRA**

Palmyra is one of the best of the magnificent old ruins in Syria. One of the worlds great historical sites, is at the oasis between Damascus and Baghdad and is surrounded by desert. My first sight of the ruins in the middle of nowhere, I thought was another ‘mirage’ shimmering in the distance which one always sees in the desert. Palmyra is mentioned as early as the 19th century BC. The Roman Emperor Hadrian visited the city in 217 AD. Palmyra’s demise began when Odenathus the ruler of the kingdom was killed in 266 AD. His wife the famous Queen Zenobia, claimed to be a descendant of Cleopatra. She was of mixed Arab/Grecian breeding. Some claimed that she had been a party to the murder of the ruler (her husband). She was a woman of outstanding ability, she ruled the country with an iron fist. Later she declared its independence from Rome. Aurelians forces defeated her army in 271 AD. Zenobia attempted to escape to Persia to obtain help but was captured by the Romans at the Euphrates. She was taken to Rome (where she died) as Aurelian’s captive, bound in pure gold chains. She was a brilliant administrator and military commander. Palmyra went into decline after her capture and finally was destroyed by Aurelian in 273 AD. The Emperor Aurelian wrote of her:

‘Those who say I have only conquered a woman do not know what that woman was, nor how lighting were her decisions, how persevering she was in her plans, how resolute with her soldiers.’ (Lonely Planet Publication, Jordan and Syria).

The subsequent history of the city is also most interesting.

The French Foreign Legion fort, forward of the ruins reminded me of the Legion forts in the Beau Geste films pre WWII. The Legion forts throughout Syria and Lebanon seemed to have the same design. All included a brothel for the use of the troops. Many of these continued to operate when the AIF took over the barracks.

**CAPTURE OF PALMYRA**

Before proceeding further I should like to point out a mistake in Long’s Greece, Crete and Syria page 440, the final line should read Iraq—Tripoli instead of Iraq–Haifa’. On 3 July, the French troops at Palmyra surrendered after a most determined and courageous defence lasting 12 days. The following day the Vichy troops at T3 also surrendered. Most of the prisoners were mercenaries of the Foreign Legion including Germans, Russians, Poles and black troops from Africa. They fought like tigers.

Following the capture of Palmyra, General Wilson directed General Clark to cut the roads from Homs to Tripoli and Homs to Baalbeck and to join up with the 10th Indian Division coming up the Euphrates toward Deir-ez-Zor and Raqqa. Captain Somerset De Chair, M. P., was one of the casualties at the Battle of Palmyra. Somerset was at Kings School, Parramatta for several years. His father had been Governor of New South Wales (Sir Dudley De Chair). In his book *The Golden Carpet*, Somerset De Chair tells how a young Australian Officer from the 2/1 Anti-Tank Regiment who was in charge of a troop of anti tank guns, had his arm blown off in the Battle of Palmyra. I had seen the troop on the pipeline road a few days earlier and was very surprised to seen an AIF Unit in the area. The young officer was offered a berth in an air ambulance but disliked aeroplanes so he refused. He took his chance about getting back to a hospital in Palestine.

Somerset took his place in the aircraft. I have since found out through Brigadier Rossi that Lieutenant Gordon Sandilands was the young officer. After rehabilitation, he continued to serve in the AIF and later the regular Army. He retired as a Lieutenant Colonel and now lives in Queensland. I spoke to him on the telephone a few days ago about the action at Palmyra. He was surprised to be remembered for the incident which had taken place so long ago.

Somerset De Chair claims that the invasion by Halbforce starting from the Mediterranean was the first time Baghdad had been captured from that
direction. Having regard to the fact that its strength was not much more than a Brigade Group, the performance of Habforce in fighting its way to Baghdad and fighting its way back to the Mediterranean must be regarded as a classical military campaign. It is all the more incredible considering it was an ill equipped and extremely poorly supplied force. Fighting under the most deplorable conditions of terrain and climate. The battle took place in the middle of summer in the desert, without air support except one attack by 3 Squadron RAAF.

The day after the battle, I went into the town to look at the Legion Fort and inspect the historic ruins. Some of the shops were open but with very little stock. We had to settle for a tin of sardines, some black olives and a bottle of wine. However, this was a welcome change from bully beef, biscuits, herrings in tomato sauce and concentrated tomato soup. It also gave us a chance to relax. The local citizens were very friendly and eager to help. I left shortly after to journey across the desert to Deir-ez-Zor on the Euphrates to try to contact the 10th Indian Division. There was one track between Palmyra and the Euphrates. Deir-ez-Zor was of great strategic importance because it had the only bridge across the river for several hundred miles on either side. On departure from Habforce, I was jokingly told by the officer who had questioned my use of their ‘dyke’, that they would always be happy for me to use it in future. I had made the grade!

**PART FOUR**

**Attachment to the 10th Indian Division**

It was agreed by General Wavell Commander in Charge of the Middle East and General Auchinleck, Commander in Charge of India that the 10th Indian Division would be made available to attack the Vichy French along the Tripoli pipeline and the Euphrates though Abu Kemal and Deir-ez-Zor. Leading to the capture of Aleppo and joining up with the 6th British Division. The track from Palmyra to Deir-ez-Zor was like all the tracks in the desert. No hard foundation, two to four inches of sand on a rocky sub soil with boulders and rocks on each side and as crooked as a snake. The passage of each vehicle left behind a cloud of choking sand. Sand storms were frequent and visibility was almost zero. Wireless communication was impossible at times. A good sun compass was a necessity, but it was not always possible to use them. The journey took many hours more than I had planned so I arrived at the Indian forward defences near the Euphrates at dusk: thirsty, filthy dirty, hot and exhausted. I was very pleased that I had not been sighted by marauding Arabs or those rebels serving under Fawzi Kawukji who was known to be in the area. It was very lonely travelling in the desert alone. Fawzi was renowned throughout Palestine where he had been a trouble maker even before the war. The British made many attempts to capture him. However, he fled to Iraq and caused trouble there. It was thought that he was wounded at T3. I was warned about him when crossing from Palmyra to Deir-ez-Zor. It was thought at the time that he would go to Persia to help with the rebellion there. Some thought he went to Germany and died there.

On arrival, at the 10th Indian Division I was an item of considerable interest, especially as I was wearing AIF uniform with the AHQ armband and had arrived without any warning. At this stage I did not know that Deir-ez-Zor had been captured that day. For this reason, I had kept to the south to hit the road from Abu Kemal some miles north of Deir-ez-Zor. I asked to be taken to the GSO or the AA & QMG of the Division. I gathered the impression that the officer who accompanied me was not too happy about my explanation of my identity. I was taken to Lieutenant Colonel Roberts, GSO 1 (later Lieutenant General GOC 34th Corps in Burma), who asked me where I had been and when I told him I had been with Habforce and their Order of Battle, and that I was attached to HQ P & TJ, he accepted my story. As the division had major supply and equipment problems, Roberts said he wanted me to meet later, the AA & QMG staff (Lieutenant Colonel Alf Snelling, later Major General Administration Fourteenth Army). After a short discussion, I was taken to meet the GOC who turned out to be Major General W. J. Slim, whom a few months earlier had been commanding the 10th Indian Brigade in Abyssinia. This was his first appointment as a Divisional commander and the start of a meteoric rise to Chief of the Imperial General Staff and later, Governor General of Australia.

To my amazement, I was given a bottle of Victorian beer at the mess truck. It appears that the division had acquired two three ton truck loads of beer. Although hot, the beer tasted very good, some officers who had the time, lowered bottles on a string into the flowing Euphrates to cool a few degrees.
Colonel Roberts gave me a full run down on the battle for Deir-ez-Zor. The main problem was moving one Brigade into a position to attack. The other Brigades had to be left behind at the base because there was no transport. Petrol was in extremely short supply. I was horrified to find out that only the fighting troops had rifles. The S & T drivers did not have rifles because there was none to give them. After the evacuation at Dunkirk, India sent a large supply of its surplus to the UK. Hence the shortages as the war developed in Iraq and Iran.

Frequently, the last drivers were 'highjacked' by marauding Arabs. So skilful were the attacks that only the chassis were left in the desert. It did not take the Arabs long to plunder these supplies and be off. It was a problem in getting supplies forward.

Apparently, the Division had the same major problems as Habforce. I repeat, hounded by enemy air strikes, no anti-tank or anti-aircraft weapons, shortages of equipment and supplies, limited field artillery weapons, (a few antique 18 pdr MK 11 guns, probably the last division to use them in operations).

I was astounded to note the ability and adaptability of a gun artificer. The composite value washer for the buffer and recuperator had packed up so that the old gun could not recoil and return to the firing position. The nearest depot for spare parts was some six or seven hundred miles away across the desert. By blending some bakelite filings from an ash tray with rubber from puncture repair kits into a mound and pressing the mixture under heat, the artificer was able to get a suitable replacement, so the gun was kept in action. These tradesmen of the Light Aid Detachment did a marvellous job keeping the force mobile under the most awful conditions. They frequently had to cannibalise vehicles to do so. The Electrical and Mechanical soldiers were excellent under the most difficult and trying operations.

The first attack on Deir-ez-Zor failed. Slim did not want to commit his force to a straight out frontal
attack so the town was attacked from the road leading from Abu Kemal and the road from Aleppo in the rear of the defenders. The track to Palmyra was at right angles. That was the one I used through Sukhna. The Vichy defenders were most surprised when they were attacked on the slopes road. After the first attack petrol supplies were critical but the ever efficient shelling was able to get sufficient by ‘milking’ vehicles and other supplies at base. There were no jerry cans at the time. Petrol was carried in four gallon tins with large wastage problems as it was carried across the bumpy desert or along the track beside the Euphrates on unsealed sandy ground. Incidentally, in 1941 there was no irrigation from the Euphrates; just a river winding through the desert (except for Deir-ez-Zor).

To my surprise, I found a small American hospital had functioned on the island. Later, I was very interested to find that the Americans also had a University in Beirut. At this time the US was not in the war. They were neutrals as they had been in the early part of WWI. At this stage it was 21 months since the war commenced, but another six months was to go before the US joined in after Pearl Harbor.

General Slim took over the local Governors residence, so the Staff lived in comparative luxury for a very few short days. They deserved it, because more desert was to follow in Persia (Iran). The staff was most helpful and friendly, especially Colonel Roberts, GSO 1. I went with him to Raqqa, 70 miles upstream after its capture two days later. It was now time to retrace my steps back to HQ P & TJ to report. It was a long and uncomfortable journey which took over two days across the desert, the only access at the time until Aleppo had been captured. Shortly after my departure the 10th Indian Division left Syria and moved to Persia (Iran) to take part in the quelling of a rebellion. I was not to see them again.

I was amazed that the Division was able to do so much in Iraq and Persia considering its deplorable equipment, scarcity of its supplies, dreadful terrain and at that time of the year, summer, which drained all strength and stamina from the soldiers. Add to this, frequent sand storms and freezing nights. All told, it was an excellent introduction to hell. I was very impressed with the Indian troops including the Gurkhas.

General Slim was one of the most interesting and charismatic generals it was my good fortune to meet. He took an extreme risk to attack Deir-ez-Zor so soon after his first attack had failed. A most amiable extrovert with a very prominent jaw and piercing eyes, with a chuckling sense of humour. He was a very great man and a brilliant soldier with the common touch. Some 12 years later Field Marshal Slim was appointed Governor General of Australia. At a Reception for him in Melbourne, I told the ADC that I had last seen the Field Marshal at Deir-ez-Zor on the Euphrates, when he had given me a bottle of Australian beer. Within minutes, I was presented to Sir William and for a short time we discussed the Battle of Deir-ez-Zor. I told Sir William that when I was introduced to his ADC at Deir-ez-Zor, as an Australian serving on HQ P & TJ, he said in the most ‘plumb in the mouth accent’, ‘Oh dear, how frightfully curious.’ Sir William laughed loudly and said that ADC always kept him amused with his comments. He had not been roughed up enough before coming to the 10th Division, but he learned quickly.

PART FIVE

Back to AHQ P & TJ at Jerusalem

The last night in the desert my sleeping bag was shared with a nest of scorpions, a most disturbing occurrence. On arrival at HQ P & TJ in Jerusalem I made my report to Colonel 'Q' who arranged for me to brief other staff on the actions at Palmyra and Deir-ez-Zor. In particular, the routes in the Iraq and Syrian deserts in those areas. I also stressed the major deficiencies of Habforce and the 10th Indian Division. Staff were amazed to hear that the RA battery had only 18 pdr MK 11 at Deir-ez-Zor. I compared this with the eight field regiments which were available to the 7th Australian Division, 6th British Division and others under the HQ 1st Australian Corps HQ.

It was suggested I should report back to Corps HQ briefly to give a similar report, particularly as Habforce was now under the 1st Australian Corps control. Then I was to continue my duties on behalf of AHQ with the 6th British Division, and the 5th Indian Brigade, who were under command of Major General Jack Evetts, (later Lieutenant General Sir John Evetts), who was to become Assistant Chief of the Imperial General Staff Weapons, at the War Office and later head of the Long Range Weapons Organisation. He selected the site for the Weapons Testing at Woomera and Maralinga.
In order to give continuity to the final stages of the Battle for Syria and Lebanon, I intend to give a brief summary of the main events leading to the surrender of the Vichy French. I stress that fact that the narrative is brief. If detailed information is required I can recommend Gavin Long's *Greece, Crete and Syria*, the Official War History, which is a comprehensive study of the campaign. At times it gets down to personal contributions. Let me begin with the events leading up to the capture of Damascus.

**DAMASCUS**

I have mentioned earlier the decision to give priority (for a time) the capture of Damascus. On 19 June, General Evetts took command of the British troops east of the Merdjayoun sector and the Free French Forces. The major components of his command were as follows:

- The 5th Indian Brigade;
- The Free French (advancing on Damascus); and
- The 16th British Brigade and Blackburn's Forces plus supporting troops.

During Lloyd's attack on Mezze which developed into a no holds barred battle, the Brigade was reinforced by 2/3 Australian Battalion. The Battalion fought splendidly both before and after Damascus. The Indian Brigade suffered huge casualties. Roy Gordon's (later Major General R. Gordon) company of 2/3 MG Battalion fought desperately and well. However, nothing could detract from the fighting ability of the Indians. Brigadier Lloyd was an excellent leader throughout. He was later to command a division in Burma, but died whilst serving. Field Marshal Slim paid an excellent tribute to Lloyd's ability and service. They set up the capture of Damascus with the AIF and let the Free French take the credit.

On 21 June, Colonel Casseau, the Free French leader, accompanied by Colonel Blackburn of 2/3 MG Battalion drove forward to meet a team of Vichy French flying a white flag. It included top officials such as the mayor of Damascus. At the Town Hall Casseau and Blackburn accepted the surrender followed by an official luncheon. Later in the afternoon, General Legentilhomme drove into the city, escorted by a detachment of cavalry. The French knew how to lay on pomp and ceremony.

The following day 22 June, the German Army attacked the USSR. This was to have a major impact on every theatre of operations. I can vividly recall the air of excitement within the forces in Lebanon and Syria. There was no prospect now of the Germans trying at that stage, to conquer the French and British mandated countries in the Levant.

The fall of Damascus was only one of the victories. It represented a very small part of the whole of Lebanon and Syria. Beirut, Rayak, Tripoli, Aleppo, Merdjayoun, Jezzine and Damour still had to be captured. Nevertheless, Damascus improved the morale of all the Allied troops in the current campaign. I remember on one occasion being taken to the French Officers Club in Damascus, a magnificent building. On entering the dining room, I was amazed to see a half grown cheetah tied to a table leg. Its master, a colourfully dressed Free French Officer, preening himself at the interest created by his pet.

There were many historical places of interest to the soldiers, including the 'Street Called Straight'. When Saint Paul was on the road to Damascus, (the same road used by our Force) he saw a light shining from heaven. Paul fell blinded to the earth; The Lord told him arise and go into the city. Paul was led into the city (a blind man). He went to the house of Judas in the 'Street Called Straight' and there Ananias in the name of the Lord, came and healed him. The Street is about 700 yards long and is straight. It is covered with an arched roof with spaced holes to let sunlight filter through. It is a normal shopping street. Another interesting place was the Tomb erected to commemorate Saladin, whose battles with Richard Cœur De Lion were subjects in our history books in my schooldays.

The Australians played an important part in the battle for Damascus as did the 5th Indian Brigade. It was appropriate for Colonel Blackburn V.C. to be one of the first into the city to receive the surrender with his French counterpart. It is also interesting to observe that HQ 1st Australian Corps had taken over control of the Campaign at 09.00 hours on 18 June. It was the first important victory for Lavarack as Corps Commander, more were to follow.

Whilst significant progress had been made on the coastal and Damascus fronts, little advance had been made around Merdjayoun. In fact, the Free French counter attack with tanks was threatening and for some time it looked as though the invaders would be thrust back into Palestine. Merdjayoun was only about 10 miles from the frontiers and it was a real danger spot.
SYRIAN AND IRAQ CAMPAIGN 1941

PROBLEMS AT MERDJAYOUN AND JEZINE

The Vichy French were fighting in the mountainous country which was easy to defend and they knew everything about every variation of the terrain. They were also better equipped and had more air support. For a time there were three separate forces in the Merdjayoun area each over one Battalion strength. Maps of the area were almost non-existent. Conditions gradually worsened. Finally, Lavarack ordered Brigadier Frank Berryman (later Lieutenant General Sir Frank Berryman), his CRA to take command of all the troops in the Area. It was a very important decision. Berryman was a brilliant staff officer and commander who succeeded Rowell as BGS at 1 Corps HQ. Later in the SWPA he was a Corps Commander, Chief of Staff to Blamey and other key appointments. Blamey recommended him as post war Chief of the General Staff but he missed out on the appointment. Lavarack decided that Berryman should organise a defensive position to cover the rear of the 25th Australian Brigade (Baxter-Cox). The force now included three Australian battalions, the Scots Greys and some of the 6th Division Calvary Regiment as well as other supporting troops.

The 25th Australian Brigade was also in trouble at Jezzine and was fighting desperately. This Vichy attack on 25th Australian Brigade had the effect of stopping the Brigade advance on the coastal roads. Lavarack ordered Brigadier Stevens to stand fast, until the situation at Merdjayoun was stabilised. The next day Lavarack reported to HQ 1 Australian Corp as commander. "Tubby" Allen became GOC of the 7th Australian Division. Not a satisfactory situation for Lavarack to take over the command. In all but the coastal sector, the Vichy French were attacking or had defeated Australian attacks. No wonder that "Jumbo" Wilson wanted to hand over at the time. Remember Wilson did the same thing in Greece when the going got too hot, he handed over to Blamey the control of the field force. That afternoon, Major General Evetts (6th British Division) was appointed to command the Merdjayoun Area. In this arrangement, Evetts was to take over up to Damour were eliminated. It was envisaged that the battle for Damour would be the key to the capture of Beirut. At that stage it was thought that the enemy would capitulate once Beirut was threatened. It was hoped that it would not develop into a house to house battle.

In the meantime, fierce fighting was taking place about Jezzine. Some of the 21st Australian Brigade from the coast were used to stiffen the 25th Australian Brigade, including the 2/14 Battalion which reinforced 2/31 Battalion in subsequent actions. It was to be a key battalion on the Kokoda track in New Guinea in 1942.

So were its sister Battalions and the 25th Brigade. Allen decided that Baxter-Cox needed medical attention and Brigadier "Pegus" Plant was appointed to command the Brigade. Plant had an excellent reputation in WWI. The infusion of the troops from the coast and the new Brigadier improved the performance of the Brigade.

Soon Merdjayoun was recaptured, the enemy had been pushed back at Jezzine. However, Beit ed Dine was still held by Vichy troops. On the coast, Jackie Stevens and his excellent Brigade was still held on the 'leash', except to clear lateral roads. Under orders not to undertake any major project. Some thought Stevens could have taken Beirut earlier if higher authority had let him go. Although it was unlikely that he would have been able to take Damour.

The position had now been reached when Lavarack could add the 17th Australian Brigade (Brigadier Savige, later Lieutenant General Sir Stanley) to the 7th Australian Division. The Brigade consisted of 2/3 Battalion, 2/5 Battalion and 2/2 Pioneers. All three units were well down on strength but had plenty of Artillery support as did all other units in the 7th Australian Division.

As mentioned earlier, Major General Evetts would be in command of the Merdjayoun and Damascus sectors and all areas in between. The numerous moves of forces from the 7th Australian Division and the 6th British Division areas and vice versa caused some problems and confusion, not least to the patient troops. Even the field regiments were changed on numerous occasions. The Australian gunners had to be versatile. The 2/4 Field Regiment of the 7th Australian Division fought shore to ship, anti-tank, field and had a crack at aircraft from time to time. The Commanding Officer, Wally Rau, won a DSO in pyjamas in one action. Gradually the Vichy strong points leading up to Damour were eliminated. It was envisaged that the battle for Damour would be the key to the capture of Beirut. At that stage it was thought that the enemy would capitulate once Beirut was threatened. It was hoped that it would not develop into a house to house battle.
PART SIX

Battle of Damour

Damour was a historic town of great importance and it had been fought for even BC. The Damour river forms a very serious obstacle to every army marching along its shore. It is quoted in the Official History of the Syrian Campaign that at the Battle of Damour, 7 Battalions of the Vichy French, including the Foreign Legion faced the 7th Australian Division at Damour and Jezzine. A force of similar size faced the 6th British Division at Merdjayoun and Jebel Mazar. All of the battalions were greatly depleted (Long 1953). On 4 July, General Allen’s directive for the battle included instructions to the 21st Australian Brigade Stevens to clear the enemy troops from south of the river and to exploit the area leading into Damour. The 17th Australian Brigade (Savige) was to be ready to counter any threats outside the 21st Brigade area or continue its attack. The 25th Brigade (Plant) was to continue towards Beit el Dine.

The Army attack was to be strongly supported by the Navy, commencing several days before and on ‘D Day’, and after General Allen had prepared a list of targets. The GSO 1 of the Division, Colonel John Chapman, was a well experienced, sound and knowledgeable officer, who was a tower of strength in the division. Later he became Major General, DCGS, AHQ. It is true to say that the Navy including ships of the RAN gave strong support in sea to land bombardment throughout the campaign. Stevens preferred the Navy support to that provided by the air force. Royal Australian Navy ships, Perth and Stuart were involved together with the Royal Navy.

The Air Force were more conspicuous in the coastal area than inland but still it was not enough. The main role was to give protection over the battlefield and to bomb and strafe targets notified by the army. Likewise it was to strafe enemy troops in the French rear. It was also to try and protect the large number of field artillery guns deployed for the battle. It should be stated that the three regiments of the 7th Division artillery under its capable and efficient CRA (Berryman) performed with great distinction throughout the Syrian campaign. As did others in the Order of Battle. One gunner officer, Lieutenant R. Cutler was awarded the Victoria Cross for exemplary bravery (later Sir Rodey Cutler V. C., Governor of New South Wales).

Included in CRA the 7th Australian Division Command was the 2/12 British Medium Battery, all told there were 62 guns in the battle for Damour. I should mention that the 7th Australian Division guns included the 2/4, 2/5 and 2/6 Field Regiments. They were commanded by good Commanding Officers. On 5/6 July, as the leading companies of the 21st Australian Brigade had set off, the artillery barrage opened fire on the French strong points, soon after the 62 gun bombardment was a massive demonstration of noise and fire and must have been frightening to the enemy and civilians. However, throughout the campaign the French artillery gave a good account of itself. They had the advantage in that they were firing on targets which they had carefully registered beforehand, also they had modern guns.

The detailed description of how the battle developed and progressed is excellently covered in the Official History. In retrospect, it is remarkable how the author was able to accumulate, dissect, research and precis the colourful and interesting narrative. Once again I want to commend the Battalion histories of the units who took part in the battle and were motivated to record their wartime experiences which will go down through the arches of the years. Some are still doing so 45 years after the war finished. I recently reviewed *Men of th 2/14 Battalion* by James McAllester, which is a first class publication. I should like to mention an article McAllester wrote for the *Australian Defence Force Journal* (No. 46:1984) in which he gave some pointed criticism of the tactics used at time on the 21st and 25th Brigades advance in Syria. He also highlights the lack of tanks and other items of equipment.

The 2/14th Battalion played an important role at Damour, being the first unit in the town, as did all the troops deployed there. I am sorry I cannot mention them all, they deserve to be mentioned, but these recollections would become another war history.

Whilst the attack on Damour was coming to an inevitable victory, there was steady progress on the 25th Brigade front at Jezzine where each of the objectives were taken after bloody battles. J. H. Gordon of the 2/31st Battalion won the Victoria Cross. The Vichy French were not giving up without putting up a hard hitting dedicated fight. They had more fight than the Free French. However, the Vichy had met their match in the 25th Australian Brigade which included the 2/25th Battalion.

What a poor forecast by Churchill and the Chiefs
of Staff in London, who thought the invasion would be a 'walk over' or that the Vichy French would welcome the British troops with flowers as soon as they walked over the frontier.

On the eastern sector, General Evetts was advancing towards the well known Bekaa Valley, which lies between the Lebanon and Anti Lebanon mountains, stretching up to Homs and opening up the way to Hama and Aleppo. The most important military aerodrome was located at Rayak in the valley. His most difficult task was to capture Jebel Mazar, by midnight on 11 July 1941 the 16th British Brigade gained the top of the range.

At 04.00 hours on 9 July a troop of the 6th Division Cavalry Regiment drove straight through Damour. Later, Brigadier Berryman and the Commanding Officer of the 2/5th Field Regiment (Lieutenant Colonel J.W.A. O'Brien, later to become Major General), drove about four miles through the town. A company of the 2/14th Battalion occupied the northern part on 7 July. The enemy was starting to crumble, but still held out at Khalde where they had erected a strong blockhouse and road blocks. By 11 July, it became clear that the French were defeated. Later. Corps HQ advised the 7th Australian Division and 6th British Division that fighting would stop in Lebanon and Syria one minute after midnight. At 08.00 hours General de Verdilhac, the leader of the French envoy on the coast drove to HQ of the 7th Australian Division. The French Commander-in-Chief, General Dentz had tried to prevent the French leader, General Catroux from playing any part in the surrender, saying that he would deal only with British High Command.

Lavarack advised Wilson to inform Dentz that the British authorities would accept no reservation about the envoys attending the Armistice. At the same time Wilson informed Dentz that unless his plenipotentiaries appeared (carrying a white flag) at the road block on the BeiruvHaifa road at 09.00 hours on 12 July or before, the battle would resume.

Wilson opened the meeting with a roaring attack on General de Verdilhac for not observing the cease fire and threatened to reopen hostilities. The French general told Wilson that he had difficulties with communications in the forward areas. At this stage, Brigadier Rowell passed a note to General Wilson saying that during the later stages of the battle, the Australians were paying the local Arabs one piastre for each telephone post they destroyed. As the French relied on civil telephone facilities it was not surprising that they had difficulty in getting information to forward posts (Full Circle by S. F. Rowell)

PART SEVEN

The Signing of the Surrender at Acre

Interest in the Surrender ceremony was heightened by several unusual, if not comical occurrences:

1. General Allen and Brigadier Stevens (although they had brought de Verdilhac to the conference) were not allowed inside the chamber due to Wilson's ego. Stevens decided to look through the window but was accosted by a British Officer and Military Policeman. In true Jackie Stevens' form the MP was given the biggest dressing down he had ever received. He departed from the scene in great haste. Jackie continued to watch the surrender through the window. We don't know what 'Tubby' Allen was doing at this time; but he wasn't inside where all the action was;

2. When the signing of the document was to take place the Press were allowed in with their floodlights to take photographs of the surrender. According to a book later written by Field Marshal Lord Maitland Wilson, an Australian photographer, who had too much to drink got himself tied up in an electric flex and fused all the lights within a three mile radius. The scene was enacted by light from hurricane lamps and a motorcycle headlight specially wheeled into the room (Wilson Page 119). Note: There is some doubt that the 'villain' was an Australian, Wilson always blamed the A1F for any trouble; and

3. The real climax came when General Catroux found someone had pinched his gold-leafed cap from his motor car. Obviously, the Australians got the blame, but Catroux was fairly decent
General Verdilhoc arriving for the signing of the Armistice at Acre, 12 July 1941. (AWM 8630)

General Sir Henry Maitland signing the Agreement for the Armistice. (AWM 8589)
about the incident. He had been told that once the Australians souvenired anything it was lost for all time. He understood this because he said his Foreign Legionaries were just the same. I wonder if any Australian has the cap?

It will be clear from the foregoing that the Australians contributed to making the surrender ceremony an occasion to be remembered. In spite of the overbearing Wilson and his aura of superiority, the Australian humour dominated proceedings. Incidentally, General Wilson was a friend of Churchill.

It is clear that the credit for the Lebanon/Syrian victory belonged in the main to Australian participation in the same was as the first Western Desert victory. Likewise, the battle for Greece and Crete gave honour to the excellent performance of the AIF. The Australian Forces were in everything up to this stage of the war in the Middle East. But they got damned little publicity. They were to get even less the South Western Pacific when they served under MacArthur.

THE ARMISTICE

The surrender terms included the following:

1. The territory north of Beirut-Damascus was to be controlled by the 1st Australian Corps which moved its HQ from Safad to Aley;
2. The 7th Australian Division would control the coastal area and western slopes;
3. The Free French, east of the Anti Lebanon range and including Damascus and Nebek;
4. The 6th British Division, the valleys between the Lebanon and the Anti Lebanons and the desert out to Palmyra.
5. Habforce, north eastern Syria west of the Euphrates; and
6. The 10th Indian Division, the area beyond the Euphrates in the far north east of Syria (a desolate dreary area).

The Vichy French were most difficult about meeting the terms of the armistice and at one stage, General Dentz was taken into custody to make certain the AIF prisoners of war were returned from France. Likewise, the Free French were just as difficult and wanted to control everything. Lavarack finally put them in their place, not an easy crowd to deal with.

BATTLE CASUALTIES IN SYRIA/LEBANON

Total Allied casualties in Lebanon/Syria were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Casualties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British and Indian</td>
<td>1,800;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>1,600;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free French</td>
<td>1,300.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vichy French casualties in Lebanon/Syria were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Casualties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Killed</td>
<td>521;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1,037;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded</td>
<td>1,790;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners</td>
<td>31,004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above mentioned figures of the Vichy French losses may not take into account the numbers who ‘debagged’ (deserted) in the course of, or after the battle. General Slim told me that when he was driving to the aerodrome at Deir-ez-Zor, he was amazed at the great number of enemy soldiers who were ‘debagging’ their military clothes and disappearing in their underclothes. This occurred at other places during the battles in Syria. Soldiers became instant civilians.

DETAILS OF AUSTRALIAN CASUALTIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brigade</th>
<th>Officers</th>
<th>Ors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 Brigade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/14 Battalion</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/16 Battalion</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/27 Battalion</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>45</strong></td>
<td><strong>479</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brigade</th>
<th>Officers</th>
<th>Ors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 Brigade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/25 Battalion</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/31 Battalion</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/33 Battalion</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>456</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In hindsight it is easy to criticise the conduct of the campaign. However, General Wavell knew the problems and forcibly brought them to the notice of Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff in London. He had also done this in the earlier campaigns in the Middle East and was to do the same later. Australian soldiers had an affection for Wavell, who tried to do his best with the men and equipment available to him, unfortunately both were in very short supply.

Later Churchill was to dump Wavell (before the campaign finished); and sent his as Commander-in-Chief to India. He was replaced by Auchinleck. I remember approaching Mafraq advanced landing ground one afternoon when there was a huge cloud of sand overhead signalling the departure of a plane with a fighter escort. On arrival, I was told that General Wavell had relinquished his command and was on his way to India. Like most other Australians, I was sorry.

The siting of AHQ Palestine and Transjordan in Jerusalem with General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson as GOC, without a Corps HQ in control of formations in Lebanon and Syria was not a success (as Rowell had forecast). It was not until the control of operations became a mess that HQ 1 Australian Corps were pitched into the battle. Fortunately, it was led by an efficient GOC and a superb staff.

General Allen, of the 7th Australian Division and General Jack Evetts, 6th British Division were capable commanders. I got to know Evetts well, which was to be of great value to me when I was posted as Lieutenant Colonel to London in 1944-45. At that time he was ACIGS (Weapons) at the War Office. Mainly through his efforts and those of General Rowell (Director of Tactical Investigation at the War Office), I was able to obtain frequent attachments within 21 Army Group from Normandy through to the surrender at Luneberg, where I was attached to HQ 79 Armoured Division. The GOC was Sir Percy Hobart, (brother-in-law of Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery). The GSO 1 of the Division, Colonel Jim Rhysonless settled in Australia after the war. He now lives in Sydney. Likewise, General Clark commanding HABforce and General Slim GOC of the 10th Indian Division were most successful in their operations against Palmyra and Deir-ez-Zor respectively. General Slim was a man to remember.

The Vichy French had some major advantages. They were fighting, mostly in high mountains which were easy to defend; they were well led, skilful and resourceful. They fought with great determination and dedication. Their weapons were better than the Allies, particularly the 100 medium tanks. The Allies had none.

In the early stages the Vichy French Air Force gave a good account of their superiority, especially in the desert at Palmyra and Deir-ez-Zor. The roundels on the Vichy French aircraft were confusingly similar to those on the Royal Air Force craft. The Royal Navy supplemented by the Royal Australian Navy ships Stuart and Perth provided a most valuable contribution on the coastal area. The bombardment from ships was accurate and effective. The Air Force did give the Royal Navy ships some protection from enemy action.

As usual, the Australian Infantry battalions supplemented by the Cavalry Regiments, Machine Gun Battalion and Pioneers, gave their usual first class performance. So did the other arms and services of the AIF. The gunners had a field day during the campaign, so did the Sappers, there was plenty of scope for their talents as there were for the Signals. Many AIF soldiers who fought in the Western Desert, Greece and Syria, thought that the battles in Syria were the most exhausting.

In retrospect, the 7th Australian Division had been ‘bloodyed’ in Syria and Lebanon. It had fought hard and long in the mountains and had not been found wanting. The same Division was to play a vital role in the mountains of New Guinea where 21 Brigade with others, fought the Japanese to a standstill on the Kokoda trail. Then the 25th Brigade were instrumental with others, in chasing the Japanese back to Burma, great division in my
opinion second to none in Australia at that time.

It will be recalled that the return of the 7th Australian Division to Australia became a matter of major disagreement between Churchill and Curtin. Churchill wanted to send it to Burma, but already the Japanese were overrunning the islands north of Australia and had already bombed Darwin. The Australian mainland was almost defenceless. General Sturdee, CGS Australia, informed the War Cabinet that he would resign unless the 7th Australian Division was returned forthwith. This was one of the most important decisions taken for the defence of Australia. At that time the AIF were all overseas, the RAAF were mainly fighting over Europe and the RAN was scattered on far and distant oceans.

In the narrative I have mentioned the appalling lack of equipment and supplies to various formations in Syria. This applied especially to Habforce and the 10th Indian Division out in those awful Iraq and Syrian deserts. It is a miracle how those forces were able to bluff and fight their way through almost impossible odds with no air or naval support. Habforce expedition from the Mediterranean to the capture of Baghdad has never been done before or since. Then it fought its way back, most of the fighting in the Iraq and Syrian deserts. They got no publicity then or since for the remarkable performance.

I was fortunate to hold a liaison job on the British Army HQ where I had so much freedom of action. Naturally I spent most of the time with the British, Indian and French Forces. In the field on occasions I was able to visit the 7th Australian Division area where I had many friends scattered through units, particularly gunners and cavalry. Many of them were wounded and some killed. Some had served with me in Darwin: Bandy McDonald, Bolger, Rice and David Jackson to name a few.

The most important lesson I learned was to admire the excellent fighting ability of the AIF in the mountains, in the desert and on the coast. Even some of the Vichy French commanders thought they were the best they had seen and said so. Somerset De Chair of the Househould Cavalry specially mentions the Anti-Tank troops out at Palmyra. He was amazed at their professionalism, discipline, dress and dedication. Not far behind were those crack Cavalry and foot regiments of the British Army. My experience at Kuneitra, Mezze and Deir-ez-Zor taught me to admire the Gurkhas and the Indian soldiers. I'm glad they were on our side.

The Australian contingent in Syria of 18,000 was greater than all the others put together, namely 8,000 UK; 5,000 Free French and 2,000 Indian. By successfully invading Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, the United Kingdom had increased the distance of defending the Suez Canal by land for some 500 miles. The same applied to the valuable oil fields of Iraq and later Iran.

My final recollection is to remember Lieutenant General Sir William Bridgeford, who by word of mouth told me to go to HQ P & TJ at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem and to do anything the HQ wanted me to do. What was to follow as a most exciting adventure for the period of the campaign in Syria, Lebanon and to a lesser extent Iraq. This was definitely a period to remember.

At the conclusion of the campaign, I was told if I desired, I could remain at Army HQ P & TJ to continue as a liaison officer in the field with the British and Indian formations in Syria and Lebanon, which I did for a short time before returning to HQ 1 Australian Corps, then at a beautiful mountain resort at Aley, a short distance from Beirut.

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**EPILOGUE**

Since I wrote the narrative Iraq has invaded Kuwait, and the United Nation's Force is determined to drive the Iraqis back to their own border. May 1991 will be the 50th Anniversary of the British capture of Iraq after the rebellion there in May, 1941. The 4th British Cavalry Brigade group, known as Habforce, departed from Nathanya (south of Haifa) in early May and Iraq surrendered at Baghdad four weeks later (31 May). Habforce made the journey of over 600 miles in midsummer, in well-worn trucks, deficient of major war-like stores and equipment, across the Transjordan and Iraq deserts. When the Force reached the Euphrates river, it was in flood. Another obstacle to be overcome for the final drive onto Baghdad. So far as I am aware, it was the only time that an Army has set out from the Mediterranean and captured Baghdad and then fought its way back across the Syrian desert almost to their starting point. In doing so, it captured Palmyra, a key fortress on route, and other important towns and villages. The Habforce expedition must rank as a great feat of arms in British military history!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Managing Editor of the Australia Defence Force Journal, Michael Tracey, for his interest and assistance over the past eight years;

Also to the Assistant Editor, Irene Coombes, Kay Rudolph-Borgar and Staff Artist, Jeff Isaacs; Colonel Theo Redhead and Harry Powell have typed and made valuable suggestions about the narrative. Somehow they have managed to read my bad writing. Rodney Morell, who served with me at HQ 1 Australian Corps in the Middle East, has helped me in many ways;

James McAllester, whose knowledge of the 7th Australian Division in Syria is hard to match, has read the narrative and made suggestions for its improvement; and

As usual, Mary Thornhill of the Defence Regional Library, Jan Truscott of the Regional Secretary’s Staff. Also Margot Temic and Rosemary Kennedy of the RSL have provided much help.

In conclusion, I wish to thank General Peter Gration, AC, OBE, Chief of the Australian Defence Force for writing the foreword to this article and for his encouragement over the years.

Thanks to them all.

The author has written many stories published in the Defence Force Journal, including ‘Australia’s Perilous Year’, ‘John Curtin’, ‘Archbishop Sir Frank Woods’, ‘Sir Frederick Shedden’, ‘Sir Vernon Sturdee’, and ‘Sir Edmund Herring’. In World War II Buckley served in the AIF in the Middle East, New Guinea, France, Holland, Belgium and Germany. On leaving the Regular Army in 1949, he was appointed Assistant Secretary, Department of Defence, and in 1958 First Assistant Secretary and Senior Officer of the Department in Melbourne for 15 years. In retirement Buckley writes military history. This story was completed during his 79th year.

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The Official History

I am indebted to the Australian War Memorial for permission to use maps, some photographs of the campaign and extracts from the narrative of The Official History.

AIF and Free French troops fraternising in a northern area. (AWM 11497)
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