

## **Greece's Campaign Against the Axis 28th October 1940 - 31st May 1941, by "Fighter"**

Αναπαράγωγή από το τεύχος Απριλίου 1946 του περιοδικού "THE FIGHTING FORCES"



The remarkable achievements of the small Greek Army during the earlier phases of the war in standing up, practically unaided, to the Italians for five months, and to the Germans for another two months, is admitted to have had an important influence on the general strategy of the war.

As we know now from the evidence produced at the Nuremberg Trial, the unexpected resistance encountered in the Balkans knocked out the German Army's schedule for the attack on Russia, which, instead of 15th May, 1941, had to be put back to 22nd June, 1941. Further, the Greek defence of Crete in May, and the losses of picked paratroops incurred by the Germans prevented the latter from carrying out their plan for synchronizing an invasion of Syria with Ali Rashid's rebellion in Iraq. The salient facts about the two campaigns-in Albania and Macedonia-are summarized below.

### I

In August, 1940, the Italian High Command in Albania began to move its forces, together with large quantities of stores and munitions, to the neighbourhood of the Greco-Albanian frontier. In view of these moves, the Greek General Staff, as a precautionary measure, reinforced its units along the frontier and at the same time proceeded to mobilize one division in Epirus, one other division and an infantry brigade in Western Macedonia.

For political reasons, that is, in order not to provoke Italy, the Greek Government refrained from calling up additional forces. It listened to the German Government's advice, conveyed through the Greek Minister in Berlin, that as long as Greece avoided giving cause for military action, Germany would prevent Italy from attacking her.

Consequently, the remaining garrisons throughout Greece were kept at their peacetime strength, although all preparations were made for rapid mobilization in case of eventualities.

From the point of view of equipment, things were very well advanced as compared with the period before 1935, and all the depots had their full complement for equipping all units in the event of mobilization.

The frontier fortifications were almost completed on the Bulgarian sector. Along the Greco-Albanian frontier fortification was limited to small fieldworks and isolated concrete pill-boxes for machine guns.

The morale both of people and Army was excellent.

## II

The Greek plan of campaign, as drawn up after Italy's seizure of Albania in April, 1939, was based on the following considerations

- a. The initiative, both in the concentration of forces and in beginning the attack, was left, for the political reasons already stated above, to Italy. This naturally was bound to give the Italians a great advantage, at any rate in the initial stages of the campaign. The Italian forces in Albania amounted then to five full divisions on a war footing (including one armoured division) and the Italians also possessed complete superiority in the air. These forces had the possibility of being increased to an unknown degree by reinforcements from Italy. Not only were the Greek forces along the frontier greatly inferior but the concentration of further Greek forces was bound to be slow and uncertain owing to the risk of interruption in communications through aerial bombardment.
- b. Allied help, in view of the guarantees already given, was regarded as a certainty, but its extent was a matter for speculation. In view of the critical situation in which Britain found herself after the collapse of France in 1940, British assistance was bound to be very small and would probably be limited to sending one or two air force units. Another result of the French collapse was that it was no longer possible to rely on the British Navy for the defence of the Greek islands and coasts and the keeping open of communications with Greece, so that a certain number of Greek forces had to be detailed for coastal defence.
- c. As regards the attitude of Greece's neighbours, Bulgaria was regarded as a certain opponent likely to take the field against Greece by the side of Italy at once or possibly later.  
Yugoslavia and Turkey were regarded as likely to remain neutral. The former was bound by no obligation to intervene in a struggle between Greece and Italy. As regards Turkey, although there existed no military convention, Turkey was bound by the political agreement of 1933 by which Greece and Turkey had mutually guaranteed each other's frontiers.

Greece therefore had to rely entirely on her own forces.

On the above suppositions, the Greek plan of operations, drawn up on a purely defensive basis, provided for the following initial distribution of forces after the mobilization :

- Albanian Front.-Eight infantry divisions and two infantry brigades.
- Bulgarian Front.-Six infantry divisions and one infantry brigade.
- Reserves.-One infantry division, one infantry brigade and one cavalry division.

As foreseen by the plan of operations, the tactical objective would be, on the Albanian front, to delay the advance of the enemy as much as possible until he could be finally stopped in front of a strong defensive position; on the Bulgarian front, to stop him in front of the fortified line.

The information concerning the general disposition of the Italian forces, in the summer of 1940, showed that the bulk of these forces, including one armoured division were concentrated along the Epirus frontier, whereas in the Korytsa-Morova sector there were only limited forces. The conclusion to be drawn from the above disposition was that the main Italian attack would be directed against Epirus. The plan of the Greek General Staff in the middle of September, 1940, following the above disposition of the Italian forces, provided for a general defensive action but also for the possibility of taking the offensive:

- In the Korytsa-Morova sector if sufficient forces could be concentrated for the capture of those two positions; and
- Against the enemy's flank by an attack through the Pindus region in Epirus.

Further, the Greek High Command, envisaged a more general offensive action as soon as it was clear that there was no immediate danger from Bulgaria and that, consequently, it would be possible to transfer forces from the Bulgarian front.

At the declaration of war (28th October, 1940) the disposition of the opposing forces was as follows:

- *Italian Forces in Albania.* -Nine to ten infantry divisions (including one armoured division), with the addition of large numbers of tanks, heavy artillery and considerable forces of Blackshirts and Albanian forces, and several hundred aircraft.
- *Greek Forces.* -Two infantry divisions and one infantry brigade; a number of independent detachments with a total strength of six battalions, with very little artillery, and, far behind the line, in Aetoloakarnania, another three battalions; no tanks or armoured cars, and very little heavy artillery.

Thus the proportion was one Greek to three or four Italian divisions.

Further, the Italians were greatly superior in heavy infantry armament suitable for mountain warfare, as each Italian infantry regiment disposed of six heavy and fifty-four light mortars to the Greeks' four heavy mortars only.

The Greek Air Force, at the declaration of war, consisted of 25 to 30 Fighters, 20 to 25 bombers, and 10 long-distance reconnaissance planes. There were also a number of planes of an antiquated type, with a speed of 120 kilometres per hour, which, needless to say, were useless for military operations.

### III

On the morning of 28th October, 1940, after the rejection of the Italian ultimatum by the Greek Premier, General Metaxas, the Italian Army attacked on a front reaching from Mt. Grammos to the sea, while the Italian Air Force bombarded the Greek front-line positions and lines of communications. North of Mt. Grammos as far as the Yugoslav frontier enemy action was on a limited scale.

The main Italian attack was launched in the direction of Jannina, the capital of Epirus, while, by a powerful thrust through the gorges of the Pindus, the Italian Command aimed at outflanking Epirus from the north and cutting off the Greek forces there from the other forces in North-West Macedonia.

After the first local Italian successes, the Greek Army, its mobilization completed, counter-attacked on 14th November and threw the enemy back to a considerable depth beyond the frontier, inflicting heavy losses. Korytsa was captured on 22nd November and Argyrocastro on 8th December.

By 28th December, at which date the severe winter and attendant difficulties of supply brought operations to a standstill, the Greek forces had reached a line Pogradets-Kanya-Suchagora-Tsenivontc-Bazair-Seferagha-Chimarra, a distance of 100 to 160 kilometres beyond the farthest point reached by the Italians in their first offensive.

By this time the strength of the of Greek forces, thanks to the timely transfer of troops from the Bulgarian front, had been raised to eleven infantry divisions, two infantry, brigades and one cavalry division, while the Italian forces had increased to sixteen infantry divisions (including an armoured division), together with several independent units of cavalry, Bersaglieri, Blackshirts and Albanian troops.

The Greek Army did not possess a single tank. Further, the Italian Air Force had a crushing superiority in the air. Nevertheless, the tiny Greek Air Force did not hesitate to challenge the Italians, often inflicting upon them heavy losses.

British help, by the end of the year, 1940, consisted of 39 fighter planes and 18 bombers, with British personnel. This small British air force rendered great services during the operations of February, 1941, when its strength consisted of two squadrons of Blenheim bombers, two squadrons of Gladiator fighters and one squadron of Hurricanes. But, from the beginning of March, this force was reduced to very small numbers, so that during the big Italian offensive of 9th to 25th March the Greek Army remained almost without air protection.

During the period between 28th December, 1940, and the Italian offensive in March, operations were confined mainly in the central sector of the front, where the Greek forces achieved advances in considerable depths.

In the above offensive, prepared long before by the Italians and which was witnessed by Mussolini himself, the Italians threw into the sector between Apsos and the River Aaos twelve divisions, including an armoured division, and several battalions of Bersaglieri and Blackshirts, very strong forces of artillery and several hundred planes against only six Greek divisions almost without air support. Nevertheless, the above attack ended in a complete defeat for the Italian forces, which did not succeed in occupying a single inch of new ground.

On 6th April, 1941, Germany declared war on Greece. After the collapse of Yugoslavia the whole position of the Greek Army on the Albanian front was threatened from the flank and rear. The Army had to fall back and only gave up the struggle after being surrounded. The Italians could not claim to have scored a single success.

This brought the glorious struggle of Greece against Italy to an end. In these operations the Greek Army employed fourteen infantry divisions and one cavalry division as against the Italians' twenty-eight infantry divisions, one armoured division and some sixty-five independent battalions, supported by a numerous air force and powerful artillery.

#### IV

As previously stated, the Greek High Command, during the course of the Albanian campaign had to withdraw considerable forces from the Bulgarian frontier.

From the beginning of February, Bulgaria began to take serious military measures. At the same time, it was reported that German war material and personnel were arriving in large numbers and taking over the Bulgarian aerodromes. The German forces in Rumania began to advance towards the Bulgaro-Rumanian frontier and bridges were thrown across the Danube at various points.

On 1st March the German forces entered Bulgaria and, screened by four Bulgarian divisions posted along the Greco-Bulgarian frontier, began to advance south.

In view of these developments, the reasons which had up to that point prevented the landing of Allied reinforcements in Greece ceased to be operative, and British reinforcements amounting to two infantry divisions and one armoured brigade were landed. At the same time, Turkey, whose intentions until then had remained ambiguous, declared that she would not take action unless her own territory was attacked.

Yugoslavia came out on the side of the Allies at the end of March, 1941, after overthrowing the Government which had signed the Tripartite Agreement with the Axis.

The strength of the Greek forces along the Greco-Bulgarian frontier had been considerably weakened through the withdrawal of reinforcements for the Albanian front. The Greek General Staff had for a moment contemplated fighting its defensive action against the enemy forces about to attack from Bulgaria on a line Mt. Kaimaktsalan - Mt. Vermon - Haliakmon River. This line, besides not requiring such strong forces, could have been linked up more easily with the Albanian theatre of operations.

This solution, however, had the disadvantages not only of abandoning a large extent of the national territory to the invaders but also of reacting unfavourably on the position of Turkey and Yugoslavia. To the latter in particular it was a matter of vital importance to keep open her communications with Salonika, which would become her principal base of supplies when attacked from the north.

After the Yugoslav *coup d'etat* at the end of March, 1941, the above plan of withdrawal had to be rejected. It was then decided to hold the fortified line Mt. Beles - mouth of the River Mesta (Nestos). Three infantry divisions and one infantry brigade (none of them up to full strength) were detailed for this purpose, in addition to the existing forces garrisoning the forts.

Two more Greek divisions and the newly arrived British reinforcements were placed in reserve on a second line running from Mt. Kaimaktsalan - Mt. Vermon to the mouth of the River Haliakmon.

Finally, the newly formed armoured division was disposed along the Vardar Corridor.

By agreement between the Greek and Yugoslav General Staffs, after the change of Government in Yugoslavia, it was decided to carry out combined operations for the purpose of liquidating the situation in Albania as soon as possible. The Greek forces were to launch a general offensive against the Italians. This offensive would be synchronized with an attack by four Yugoslav divisions to be ready by 12th April.

It was further agreed that strong Yugoslav forces would secure the southern sector towards the Bulgarian frontier so as to prevent any enemy action from that quarter which, if successful, would cut off contact between the Greek and Yugoslav forces.

On the morning of 6th April Germany declared war on Greece and Yugoslavia, and powerful German forces took the offensive against both countries.

The strong German forces operating from Southern Bulgaria attacked the fortified Greek positions in Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace, while other forces were directed against the southern sector of the Yugoslav front in the region of Strumnitsa with the object of driving a wedge between the Yugoslav and the Greek armies.

The German attack on the Greek fortified line was smashed with heavy losses. The line of forts stood up against the whole weight of the powerful German onslaught, which was supported by large numbers of tanks and planes. In this epic struggle the Greek forces were not only inferior in numbers and armament, owing to the fact that a large part of the heavy guns and other equipment had been dispatched to the Albanian front, but also were entirely devoid of friendly support from the air, while the German planes flew over the positions by the hundred dropping bombs.

But whereas the German attack failed to break through the line of Greek forts, the German forces operating against the Yugoslav front soon broke through and by forcing the passage through the corridor of the Strumnitsa River, soon found themselves in the open valley of the Vardar, whence their advance towards Salonika was virtually unopposed, as the defence of that flank of the Greek front had been left entirely to the Yugoslav Army.

At the same time, other German forces advanced swiftly through Yugoslav territory to join up with the Italian forces on the Albanian front, while another strong corps moved from the region of Skoplje southwards towards Western Macedonia, thus outflanking the line Kaimaktsalan - Vermon and threatening the flank and rear of the Greek Army on the Albanian front.

On this front, the extreme right of the Greek front, in accordance with the agreement between the Greek and Yugoslav High Commands, launched a vigorous offensive on the morning of 7th April, and drove back the opposing Italian forces to a considerable depth, capturing a large number of prisoners. On the Yugoslav side there was no corresponding move. In view of the German threat to the Greek rear, the continuation of the Greek offensive came to a standstill.

On 9th April the Germans occupied Salonika, thus leaving the rear of the fortified line in Eastern Macedonia completely uncovered. The garrisons of the forts were forced to capitulate, after having bravely repulsed all the attacks of the enemy up to that point.

The remaining Greek and British forces in Central Macedonia and Thessaly, under strong German pressure, were compelled to withdraw southwards. Finally, the British forces, after a defensive action at Thermopylae, succeeded in embarking and evacuated Continental Greece, some of them going to Crete.

The Germans entered Athens on 27th April. It did not take them long to make themselves masters of the whole of Greece and carry out their preparations for the capture of Crete. Crete fell in the latter part of May after a hard fight. This may be said to have brought to an end the hostilities in Greece.

Hitler himself and all ranks of the German Army paid ample tribute to the valour of the Greek soldiers and the tenacity shown by the Greek Army.

A word must also be said about the great services rendered by the small Greek Navy. Throughout the period of hostilities the Greek Fleet, though far inferior in numbers and

strength to the Italian Fleet, did not confine itself to the defensive but also engaged in offensive operations. It effectively covered all the transports of troops and material, often in highly exposed areas, without a single transport being lost. At the same time, it harassed the enemy communications in the Straits of Otranto, inflicting on him considerable losses in transports and probably sinking one U-boat. It carried out frequent raids in the Adriatic and bombarded the enemy coasts. Its losses, up to the date of the German declaration of war, were insignificant. But after the beginning of the German attack the Greek Navy suffered very heavy losses from air bombardment.

After covering the withdrawal of the British forces to Crete and from Crete to Egypt, the remnants of the Fleet withdrew to Alexandria.

## V

Although the fall of Crete in May, 1941, brought the official war to an end, the resistance of the Greek people to the triple invaders-Italians, Germans and Bulgars- continued without interruption and at the cost of heavy sacrifice.

The enemy was compelled to maintain considerable forces in the country. The strength of the occupation forces is reckoned to have been ten to twelve Italian divisions and six to eight German, not including the Bulgarian forces in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, which the Bulgars were allowed to occupy in payment for their services.

The above figures prove the extent of Greece's contribution to the Allied struggle throughout the cruel years of the occupation. These services might have been even greater had the national effort been better directed.

Outside Greece too the remnants of the Greek forces from Crete, strengthened by volunteers from Greece itself and recruits from the Greek communities abroad, kept the flag flying on the battlefields of North Africa and Italy, at El Alamein and Rimini. Units of the Greek Navy and Air Force continued to serve by the side of their British allies in the Mediterranean.

Such was the contribution of Greece during the Second World War. Starting on 28th October, 1940, the struggle continued unabated for the best part of five years until the final victory.

When the moment comes to appraise each country's share in the Allied triumph, it should not be forgotten that, for seven months, during the most critical period of the Allies fortunes in 1940-41, the Greek nation, united, stood up to the overwhelming power of the Axis and set an example which, morally as well as materially, should not be underestimated in the general balance sheet of the war.

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