

1941.

NEW ZEALAND.

2nd NEW ZEALAND EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.**CAMPAIGNS IN GREECE AND CRETE.**

SHORT UNOFFICIAL ACCOUNT PREPARED BY THE GENERAL OFFICER COMMANDING THE 2ND N.Z.E.F. (MAJOR-GENERAL B. C. FREYBERG, V.C., C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., LL.D.) FOR THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (HONOURABLE F. JONES) ON THE OPERATIONS OF THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION IN GREECE AND CRETE.

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Leave.

GREECE.

By the end of March the New Zealand Division was concentrated in Macedonia. The 5th Brigade Group had arrived from England, thus the three contingents were together for the first time in the history of the Division. Their first role was preparing a defensive position in conjunction with the Greeks, from the coast south of the River Aliakmon to Verria Pass. The long front was too vulnerable for the forces available, and following the enemy's attack on Yugo-Slavia and Greece on the 6th April the Division was ordered to retire to a strong position on the line of the Passes, 4th Brigade Group to Servia, 5th and 6th Brigade Groups to Olympus. A quick withdrawal was made in rain and snow. This was accomplished without loss of equipment or supplies, showing a high standard of discipline and endurance in the first trial. Rain and overcast skies were a blessing, as no enemy aircraft molested our forces. This retirement was completed by 10th April. On the 12th the Australians and New-Zealanders were formed into the 2nd Anzac Corps, giving great satisfaction. From the 10th the Division fought several actions, mainly as three separate Brigade Groups, each comprising all arms. The machine-gun detachment on the Yugo-Slav frontier fired the first New Zealand shots at Veve at 2100 hours on the 10th April. On the 13th the Divisional Cavalry and Artillery on the Aliakmon River fought delaying actions, retiring over Olympus Pass on the 14th. The 4th and 5th Brigade Groups under Brigadiers Puttick and Hargest respectively came into action simultaneously at historic Servia and Olympus Passes. The 4th Brigade Group held Servia Pass, while Imperial and Greek troops from Florina Gap withdrew. The infantry action was severe, and the Germans suffered heavy casualties. The 5th Brigade Group, plus the Maoris, were holding the long line of the Olympus position, and the 21st Battalion held the coastal defile and railway-tunnel near Platymon. At Olympus the artillery, firing a phenomenal number of rounds,

smashed the German tank advance, the infantry beating off heavy attacks made through woods under cover of mist. The success of the German thrust against the Greeks on the left threatened the rear of the Olympus position, and a withdrawal to the Thermopylæ Line was ordered for the 16th and 17th April, Brigadier Barrowclough's 6th Brigade Group moving to a covering position south of Elasson. After fighting with great determination and repulsing heavy attacks the 4th and 5th Brigade Groups and the Australians retired again under the cover of mists to the south of the 6th Brigade Group. Meanwhile the 21st Battalion had been forced back from the tunnel by tremendous odds, including a large armoured force. Later, with Brigadier Allen's Australian Brigade Group, they held the Peneios Gorge position. The 21st Battalion suffered heavy casualties. The stands at Peneios and Elasson, where British, Australian, and New Zealand artillery took toll of enemy tanks, breaking attacks, were vital.

WITHDRAWAL FROM GREECE.

The force was finally disengaged on the night of 13th April, and the Division withdrew 100 miles to the Thermopylæ Line. The remarkable success of this withdrawal surprised both the enemy and ourselves. The Division now prepared a line at the historic Thermopylæ Pass, while the Australians barred the other Athens road. This was destined to be only a temporary position, as the collapse of the gallant Greek Army made the continuation of the fight impossible. Brigadier Barrowclough's force, with Divisional Artillery and British batteries, held the Pass. At dusk on Anzac Eve they beat off a strong German attack, 25-pounders destroying a large number of tanks. Disengaging by dark the 6th Brigade Group withdrew through the 4th Brigade Group which included Australian Artillery holding a covering position south of Thebes. That night the 5th Brigade Group successfully embarked for Crete. The artillery and other divisional troops, totalling 3,600, embarked on the night of 26th/27th April. On the 27th the 4th Brigade Group, after being cut off by parachute attacks on the Corinth Canal, fought a determined rearguard action almost on the beach at Porto Rafti, near Marathon, keeping the enemy at bay and embarking safely. Meanwhile the Divisional Headquarters and the 6th Brigade Group moved to Peloponessus, crossing the Corinth Canal just ahead of a parachute attack on the morning of the 26th. The 26th Battalion attacked and held the air-borne troops, and subsequently, with the remainder of the 6th Brigade Group and attached British and Australian troops, continued the withdrawal through Tripolis and Sparta to Monemvasia. Final evacuation took place on the night of 28th.

I very much regret the loss of so many of our first-line reinforcements and details headquarters left at Athens. The party reached Kalamata, but, owing to the temporary occupation of the town by Germans and the subsequent loss of contact between ships and the land, it was only possible to embark a small party. All branches of the service reached a high standard. The achievements of the infantry, and the artillery under Brigadier Miles have already been mentioned. The demolition of roads and bridges by the engineers, by delaying the enemy continually, was a great contribution to successful withdrawal. Signals maintained communications during most difficult operations. The Army Service Corps, including the Reserve Motor Transport Company, played a great part in supplying the forces throughout the whole of the operations and in carrying troops. The medical services carried out their duties with great efficiency. Almost all the wounded who could be moved were evacuated. The 6th Brigade Group and 6th Field Regiment were ordered to Egypt, the remainder disembarking at Crete.

CRETE.

In Crete the New Zealand Division, commanded by Brigadier Puttick, comprised the 4th Brigade Group (Brigadier Inglis), 5th Brigade Group (Brigadier Hargest), and 10th Composite Brigade Group (Colonel Kippenberger), the last including an improvised New Zealand Battalion of Artillery and A.S.C. personnel and two Greek battalions. Living-conditions were hard owing to the shortage of blankets, clothing, cooking-utensils, knives, forks, spoons, &c. The first twenty-days period

was spent in preparation, digging, wiring, and putting in guns as quickly as available supplies and equipment arrived. Supply difficulties increased as the air attacks developed. The number of planes available, the exposed position of the aerodromes, and the scale of the enemy air attack made it impossible for the R.A.F. to operate from Crete. I asked that the few remaining fighter aircraft be sent to Egypt to avoid useless loss of lives of the pilots who had fought gallantly against tremendous odds. The Egyptian aerodromes were too far away to give effective help, and the Germans had complete air superiority.

BATTLE FOR CRETE.

The battle started on the 20th May with tremendous air bombardment followed by glider and parachute landings over the Canea-Maleme area. The troops were in the Maleme-Canea sectors, where the main attack was launched. The majority of the parachutists were mopped up, but some gained a footing in the areas away from the defences. The Greek King was nearly captured. Maleme sector was vital, and here the 5th Brigade Group, including some battalions of the 4th Brigade Group, met the attack from the west, while the 4th and 10th Brigade Groups fought along Galatos Ridge. On the first day relays of enemy aircraft straffed our positions, and fierce hand-to-hand fighting raged on Maleme Aerodrome. At the close of the day the forces faced each other on the east and west of the aerodrome. On the second day, although the aerodrome remained no-man's land and was under fire from captured Italian guns manned by our artillery, troop-carriers landed there and beyond the aerodrome in the river-bed, regardless of losses. Parachute reinforcements also arrived, and the savage air bombardment continued. A three-hour attack on Galatos was repulsed. That night we watched the navy send sea-borne invaders to the bottom. A counter-attack before dawn on the third day reached Maleme Aerodrome, but heavy dive-bombing at daylight made further progress impossible, and later in the day an attack by the enemy on our flank forestalled our plan for another counter-attack and forced us to withdraw to a shorter line. Heavy fighting continued on the fourth and fifth days on the new line and at Galatos, where attacks were again repulsed. Sunday, the sixth day, was critical and hard for the tired Australian and New Zealand troops. After continuous air straffing all day a strong enemy attack took Galatos in the evening, but the British light tanks and New Zealand infantry retook it at the point of the bayonet. In my opinion, this was one of the great efforts in the defence of Crete. With Maleme Aerodrome no longer under fire troop-carriers poured in with reinforcements of men and equipment. Tired troops could not withstand this indefinitely, and on Sunday night the New Zealand Division and the Australians were ordered to withdraw to a new line west of Suda. Between Canea and Maleme the New Zealand Division, later supported by Brigadier Vasey's Australian Brigade, had fought for six days without respite. More than twenty fierce bayonet counter-attacks were carried out. Fighting was the most bitter of this war, and such fierce hand-to-hand fighting had seldom been seen, while the scale of enemy air attack was unprecedented. With Brigadier Vasey's Brigade, our 5th Brigade covered the withdrawal from Suda. Here at the finish of our real defence the men in the front line said, "Let's fix bayonets and go for them." A joint New Zealand and Australian bayonet charge drove the enemy back over a thousand yards, but the position could not be held. On the withdrawal to Sphakia Beach our battalions fought rearguard actions together with Australians and Royal Marines. The bulk of the fighting troops were evacuated, but losses were heavy. Many of our wounded had to be left behind with doctors and medical orderlies, who had spontaneously volunteered to stay with them.

The above is only a brief outline, largely confined to a record of our own units, in an effort to give a picture of the campaign to those at home. We pay tribute to all our comrades—British, Australian, and Greek—who fought so gallantly in both campaigns. Our greatest admiration and gratitude go to the Royal Navy, who guarded Crete so effectively from sea-borne invasion and brought so many safely back from Greece and Crete. History will show these campaigns in their true perspective.

Fresh facts are coming to hand. In Crete the enemy underestimated our strength and expected to capture the island with parachutists alone. He failed and had to lay on a full-scale attack which used up in all 35,000 highly-trained and perfectly-equipped troops. Although successful, his losses were great and he was severely mauled. He lost at least 4,000 killed, 2,000 drowned, and 11,000 wounded. By having to fight he was delayed a month in his plans, and, when the time came, he had neither material nor troops nor the inclination to face further air landings in either the Western Desert or in Syria. What is even more important, he has now no illusions about the fate which awaits any attempt at air-borne operations against Great Britain.

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