

## **Greece, 1941: Military Folly as Political Masterstroke**

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### **NOT FOR CITE OR QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION**

On 10 January 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had a special visitor to lunch at Downing Street, an American, Harry Hopkins. Despite Hopkins' chronic digestive problems – he'd been diagnosed with stomach cancer in 1939, and complications from the disease finally killed him in 1946 - the lunch went well, and lasted more than three hours. Hopkins might not have eaten much, but he was probably well-sustained by Churchill's assessment of the war situation. At the time, a British and Australian force was advancing rapidly through the Italian colony of Libya in North Africa, and Greece was holding out against an ill-starred invasion that Italian fascist dictator Mussolini had launched against that country the previous October. But, as Hopkins recorded, Churchill admitted that 'Greece is lost – although he is now reinforcing the Greeks – and weakening his African Army.' But like many of us, and perhaps politicians most of all, Churchill thought he could have his cake and eat it too – 'the debacle in Greece', he told Hopkins, would be offset by the 'sure defeat of the Italians in Africa'.<sup>1</sup>

Churchill's candour with Hopkins was remarkable, given the American held no official position at the time. But he was the personal emissary to Britain of US President Franklin Roosevelt, and Churchill was going all out to impress him, for reasons that had more to do with political

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume 6, Finest hour, 1939-1941*, London: William Heinemann, 1983, 982-3

economy than military strategy. To put it bluntly, Britain had run out of money, and no longer had the financial resources to defend its empire. Over Christmas 1940, Churchill's Cabinet grappled with what to do with the last of the Empire's gold reserves, with a body of opinion, led by Minister for Aircraft Production, the Canadian Lord Beaverbrook, staunch in the view that what was left should not be handed over to the United States in payment for war supplies.<sup>2</sup>

Beaverbrook might as well have wasted his breath, because Churchill knew that Britain could survive only by throwing itself on American mercy. Roosevelt already had a scheme to deliver what the cash-strapped British needed, and in his homely fireside manner, explained it to the American public in a radio broadcast on 29 December 1940. The result would be the famous Lend Lease scheme, in which the US Government underwrote supplies to Britain and her allies not on a sales basis, but as loans. Churchill needed Lend Lease as a form of national oxygen, and while Roosevelt went about manoeuvring it through the American legislature, and so no amount of hospitality was too generous for Hopkins, and nor was there any limit to British cooperation on military technology and intelligence (among other cutting-edge technologies, the British handed over the jet engine to the Americans). But in a reminder that a nation has only interests, not friends, first the Americans insisted on getting what was left of Britain's gold reserves, and the US Navy cruiser *Louisville* duly docked at New York on 25 January 1941, with South African bullion, then worth a quarter of billion dollars.<sup>3</sup>

When we look at the Greek campaign and the Battle of Crete that followed it, we can only evaluate British decision-making in this context of wartime political economy, and in particular, the irresistible need to impress the Americans with every decision that London made in the prosecution of the war. In short, the campaign in Greece was an opportunity to show Washington that come what may, Britain would

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, *Finest Hour*, 971

<sup>3</sup> *The Washington Post*, 26 January 1941

take the fight to Hitler, and thereby warrant the huge economic investment the United States would have to make to keep Britain in the war.

The origins of the Greek campaign are well-known, and need only be briefly summarised. After Hitler tore up the Munich Agreement in March 1939 by marching into what was left of Czechoslovakia, the government of Neville Chamberlain finally drew its line in the sand, and along with the French, gave a range of security guarantees to governments in eastern Europe and the Balkans. One such guarantee was provided to Greece, by way of a declaration on 13 April 1939, in which the British undertook that in the event of a threat to Greek independence, Britain would render 'all support' within its power. This was despite the Greek Government, led by General Ioannis Metaxas, sharing many of the characteristics of a dictatorship, including the elimination of political parties and independent trade unions, and the use of prison camps to exile political opponents.

When Benito Mussolini made his ill-fated decision to invade Greece on 28 October 1940, hoping to emulate Hitler's successes in Western Europe earlier in the year, the British were quick to honour the 1939 declaration. On the very evening of the invasion, the Defence Committee of Churchill's War Cabinet made a decision committing British forces to help the Greeks, but the form of that assistance would have profound implications for the future of the campaign in Greece, but also more particularly for the Battle of Crete. From the outset, Metaxas was hesitant to accept the presence of a large British land force in his country, for fear of provoking the Germans to join in the Italian invasion. Initially, this suited the British perfectly, because Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff viewed Mussolini's blunder as an opportunity to strengthen the position of the Royal Navy in the eastern Mediterranean, by taking possession of Suda Bay as an advanced base.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> National Archives (United Kingdom), hereafter NA, CAB 80/56, War Cabinet, Defence Committee (Operations), Minutes, 28 October 1940

Unfortunately, this conception of Crete as an advanced base for further operations, rather than as frontline garrison requiring a comprehensive defence plan, would characterise British thinking about the island right up until 29 April 1941, when the Kiwi General Freyberg landed at Suda Bay and was given the task of organising an impromptu and ill-equipped defence effort in three short weeks.

But first, back to the fighting on the mainland. As we know, the indomitable resistance of the Greeks in the northern winter of 1940-41 inflicted the first substantial reverse on the Axis forces in a land campaign in the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> Despite the authoritarian nature of the Metaxas regime, Greece became the *cause celebre* for Western democracy, a triumph crowned by that bastion of American liberalism, Time Magazine, paying the Greek Commander in Chief, General Papagos, the ultimate compliment by displaying his portrait on its front cover, in the shadow of the ancient home of democracy, the Parthenon.



In this euphoric atmosphere, Churchill had a heaven-sent opportunity to impress American public opinion with the resolve of the British to fight the Axis dictators, notably by returning a British Army to the continent of Europe. There were just two problems with these hopes – first, Metaxas did not want such an army, grateful though he was for the air support provided by a detachment of the Royal Air Force, for fear that its presence would attract a German invasion, and second, British Chiefs of Staff knew full well, right from the start, that such a deployment could only end in defeat. On 18 January, 1941, they provided an appreciation to the War Cabinet that sombrely concluded: ‘if Germany does undertake large-scale operations against

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<sup>5</sup> This discounts the Allied re-occupation of Narvik in May 1940, that lasted but a few days. The neglect of the Greek military achievement is addressed by J. Sadkovich, ‘Anglo-American bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941’ in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol 58, No. 4, Oct. 1994

Greece, we could impose no more than a small delay on their occupation of the country.’<sup>6</sup>

So what changed? Well most importantly, the arch-realist Metaxas died on 29 January 1941. In his replacement, Alexandros Koryzis, Churchill found a leader more willing to accept a British Army, and at a most convenient moment. On 8 February 1941, Roosevelt jumped the first hurdle mounted in the saddle of Lend Lease, when the US Congress gave the scheme its blessing – only a vote in the Senate remained to secure Britain’s salvation.<sup>7</sup>

At this point, the British position in the Mediterranean appeared strong. Western Desert Force in Libya, under the command of General Richard O’Connor, comprised principally of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division and the Australian 6<sup>th</sup> Division, had pushed half-way across the Italian colony of Libya, culminating in the occupation of the port of Benghazi and the destruction of a complete Italian army at the Battle of Beda Fomm. With the threat to Egypt and the Suez Canal seemingly eliminated, on 12 February 1941 Churchill cabled General Archibald Wavel, British Commander in Chief in the Mediterranean, to halt the offensive in Libya and concentrate on reinforcing the Greeks.

Perhaps succumbing to the disease of victory, in these heady days, all kinds of adventures were being dreamed up in London, from an invasion of Sardinia, to the occupation of Sicily and the despatch of aid to Yugoslavia and Turkey to build a ‘Balkan Front’ against the Axis. These hopelessly romantic ideas were part of public relations offensive to impress another emissary from Roosevelt, ‘Wild’ Bill Donovan, later the founder of the CIA, who was despatched on a tour of the Balkan capitals to assure all and sundry that the United States was not going to let Hitler win the war.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> NA CAB 80/56, Chiefs of Staff Committee, ‘Review of Our Policy in the Mediterranean’, 18 January 1941

<sup>7</sup> Roosevelt’s political victory in the Congress is recorded in triumphant tones by *The Washington Post*, 9 February 1941

<sup>8</sup> For Donovan’s role, see A. Cave Brown, *The Last Hero: Wild Bill Donovan*, London: Michael Joseph, 1982

The problem of course was that substantial American aid was months away, and in the meantime, the Greek military was running out of, if not morale, then supplies, notably a shortage of brass and copper with which to keep its munitions plants running. This was so serious that British defence planners were scrambling to find scrap metal to send to Greece, in an effort to maintain Greek resistance sustained long enough for a British Army to arrive.<sup>9</sup> Greek military planners knew exactly what they faced if Germany decided to bail out Mussolini, and their realism was such that the British Military Mission in Athens had to resort to pep talks to stamp out 'defeatism' when staff talks got under way to plan for the arrival of the British Army. On 11 February, Lieutenant Colonel Salisbury-Jones, a member of the British Mission, lectured on his counterpart Colonel Kanelopoulos on the dangers of believing the Germans were invincible, arguing that the mountainous terrain of the Balkans would prevent their armoured columns from operating with the freedom they enjoyed in France the previous year.<sup>10</sup> This naïve underestimation of what German armour could do in even mountainous country characterised the British conduct of operations when the fighting got under way in April.<sup>11</sup>

The British force sent to Greece would be called Force W after its commander, General Maitland Wilson, and it was of course, more an ANZAC formation than a "British" one, its principal units being the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions and the New Zealand Division, supported by the British 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Brigade. Given this small force was likely going to face a much superior German Army arriving in Bulgaria, the British faced a tricky diplomatic task in convincing the Australian and New Zealand Governments that the whole idea was a viable military venture and not a forlorn gesture.

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<sup>9</sup> The British scramble to find raw materials for the Greek munitions plants can be found in NA WO 193/551 Greece: Equipment For

<sup>10</sup> NA WO 201/16, Notes of Meeting, 11 February 1941

<sup>11</sup> See Peter Ewer, 'The British Campaign in Greece 1941: Assumptions about the Operational Art and Their Influence on Strategy', in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol 76, No.3, July 2012

This was accomplished in a masterful political performance by Archibald Wavell. When Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies arrived in Egypt in early February 1941, enroute to London for talks with Churchill, Wavell succeeded in giving Menzies, and General Thomas Blamey, the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Imperial Force, the impression that both supported the despatch of Force W, even though the Australians never had a conversation on the topic before Menzies left for London in mid-February. Menzies' diary suggests that he considered Wavell a slippery character, but he didn't press this assessment by checking with Blamey what plans the British had in store for the AIF.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, when Menzies arrived in London, he was confronted on 24 February with a sobering briefing from the British Chiefs of Staff, which conceded that defeat in Greece was likely, but no matter, because the despatch of Force W was needed to impress the Americans, and in any event, its defeat would do no long term harm to the prospects of victory over the Germans. Thus, intoned the Chiefs of Staff, 'deserting' the Greeks would have a 'lamentable' effect on American public opinion. As for any force sent to Greece, even 'complete failure' – which in military terms might involve the total loss of the assets committed – would not be 'disastrous to our future ability to defeat Germany'.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, what was not disastrous to the war effort in the long term might well have been a catastrophe for the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions, and the consequences for an Australian Prime Minister committing troops to a campaign known in advance to end in inevitable defeat were obvious. But try as he might to ask pointed questions in London, Menzies made little impression on the course of events, as the British carefully controlled who was told what, and when about plans for the campaign. Thus, even before Force W began

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<sup>12</sup> A. W. Martin and P. Harding (eds) *Dark and Hurrying Days: Menzies 1941 Diary*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1993

<sup>13</sup> NA CAB 80/57, War Cabinet, Chiefs of Staff Committee, Policy in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean: Report, 24 February 1941

leaving Egypt on 6 March, the British made plans for the inevitable German victory, planning a program of demolitions, the details of which were to be kept strictly away from the Greeks whose infrastructure was slated for destruction. This 'scorched earth' policy was intended to deny the Germans anything of value, but it was a British secret – the War Office told Wavell 'Greek authorities should not (repeat not) be consulted at this stage.'<sup>14</sup>

Now it should be acknowledged that in playing free and easy with the interests of the Greeks, and the Australians and New Zealanders, Churchill was at least prepared to run considerable risks to the survival of Britain itself. In March 1941, the Battle of the Atlantic was at its height, and indeed, in that month, the loss of Allied shipping hit its highest total in the war to date – 474,874 gross registered tons - and indeed, the British were losing more ships than they could build.<sup>15</sup>

The problem that losses on this scale posed for the Greek venture was that transporting just three divisions and an armoured brigade across the Mediterranean involved a shipping commitment the British could ill-afford. The naval effort involved was code-named Operation Lustre, and this was forecast to require on an annual basis 910,000 tons of shipping, an estimate that made no allowance for the losses which would be unavoidable in a high intensity combat zone.<sup>16</sup>

Such a commitment would require both a reduction of imports to Britain, and the suspension of troop movements in the Indian Ocean for a period of months, realities that were distinctly unpalatable. With typical insouciance when it came to logistics, Churchill waved away the problems, and effectively asked his Chiefs of Staff to invent the required capacity by magically converting damaged ships into operational vessels, minuting them on 2 March to find the shipping needed for Lustre from the tonnage 'lying idle' under repair.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> NA WO 106/2146 Operations in Greece, War Office to C. in C. Middle East, 2/3/41

<sup>15</sup> For the wastage in the British merchant marine and available neutral shipping, see NA CAB 68/8/23

<sup>16</sup> NA CAB 80/57 War Cabinet. Chiefs of Staff Committee. Analysis of Shipping Implications. Report

<sup>17</sup> Churchill's minute of 2 March can be found at NA CAB/79/43, Chiefs of Staff Committee, 4 March 1941



The Chiefs of Staff side-stepped this mysticism, by instructing the Director of Sea Transport to direct the principal shipping officer in the Mediterranean to mount Operation Lustre on what was effectively a hand to mouth basis. This involved Lustre proceeding without dedicated shipping, because such an allocation could not be provided from the dwindling pool of British merchant tonnage. Instead, the troops would be transported with such shipping as could be freed up locally.<sup>18</sup> As the Russians recently found out in the Ukraine, this kind of ad hoc logistical planning is not a recipe for military success.

What is significant at this point that this dire shipping position was held close to British chests. Just as the Greeks were not to be alarmed by preparations for defeat with a program of demolitions, so the Australians were assured that there were no problems on the shipping front. To allay Australian concerns about how the ANZACS might be taken out of Greece should the need arise, they were assured of an 'abundance' of local shipping.<sup>19</sup>

Despite such assurances, pennies were dropping for the Australian leadership. After Menzies in London told his Cabinet in Canberra that Force W was going to Greece, his Ministers were dumbfounded on 9 March when they received a request from Blamey asking permission to submit an appreciation about the chances his men faced in Greece. Understandably, Army Minister Percy Spender granted his permission, and the Menzies Cabinet was even more understandably taken aback when Blamey's appreciation, prepared by his Chief of Staff, Sydney Rowell, arrived on 10 March. In this, Blamey and Rowell accurately forecast that: 'Military operation extremely hazardous in view of the disparity between opposing forces in numbers and training.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cable, Director of Sea Transport to PSTO Egypt, copy at NA CAB/79/43, Chiefs of Staff Committee, 4 March 1941

<sup>19</sup> NA CAB 80/57, War Cabinet, Chiefs of Staff Committee, Note By Secretary, 28 February 1941

<sup>20</sup> Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Sydney: Collins, in association with Australian War Memorial, 1986 (first published 1953)

But this long overdue integration of Australian military and political decision-making was too late to influence efforts – Force W had already begun leaving Egypt four days earlier. But what was for Australia a disastrous episode in strategic decision-making, was for Churchill a deliverance, because he got what he wanted above all else – Lend Lease. Two days before the Australian Cabinet got the sobering assessment of what the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF was up against, the American Senate passed the Lend Lease Act. A relieved Churchill wrote that this was a ‘a monument of generous and far-seeing statesmanship.’<sup>21</sup>

So Churchill got what the campaign was intended to deliver, and all that was left was for Force W to pay the cost. One of the issues which has generated controversy is the performance of Thomas Blamey as commander of ANZAC Corps, when it was formed on 12 April 1941. The first thing to say on this score is that the second ANZACS never got to fight as an organised force. As British Military Intelligence, MI3, correctly forecast in early March, the Germans could quickly deploy a strong armoured contingent into central Greece, and so it proved in practice when the Nazi invasion began on 6 April.<sup>22</sup> The result was ANZAC Corps was caught mid-deployment, a most unfavourable scenario for any formation; several battalions of 6<sup>th</sup> Division were still disembarking on 6 April, and of course, 7<sup>th</sup> Division never got to Greece at all. In consequence, ANZAC Corps was broken up into brigade-size blocking formations, fighting rear guards from the far north at Vevi, and thence right back to the beaches of the Peloponnese. The fact the Australians and New Zealanders managed it at all was a signal achievement, but Blamey’s contribution to it is the subject of debate, and his critics included his own Chief of Staff, Sydney Rowell. The tensions in Greece permanently fractured their relationship, as would become evident in New Guinea later in the war. Blamey also left Greece before his men were evacuated. Since he did so under orders from Wavell, Blamey might be excused from criticism

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<sup>21</sup> For a press report, see *The Washington Post*, 9 March 1941; for Churchill’s appreciation, see Gilbert, *The Finest Hour*

<sup>22</sup> WO 106/3133 Lustre General, Note on possible German advance into Northern Greece, DDMI, 3/3/41

on this score, except that he organised for his son, Major Tom Blamey, to take the last place on the flying boat out of Athens, something that left his senior officers aghast.

And finally some remarks on the naval aspect of the fighting, which of course concluded with the Battle of Crete. In the evacuation of the troops from the island, more sailors of the British Commonwealth were killed in action than Commonwealth soldiers had been in the fighting on land – 1,828 men of the Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy died in the effort to evacuate the troops.<sup>23</sup>

These dreadful losses, which involved damage to an aircraft carrier and three battleships, and the sinking of three cruisers and six destroyers, were a consequence of the flawed plan of operations that governed the whole campaign. When Force W went to Greece, the British left behind a series of Italian air bases on the sea routes between Egypt and Athens. These bases included airfields on Rhodes, but especially one at Karpathos (then known by the Italian name, Scarpanto), just to the east of Crete. Again, the British Chiefs of Staff knew of this danger, writing on 18 January that such airfields would 'seriously embarrass our sea communications' should they play host to German air forces.<sup>24</sup> To deal with the threat to the Allied rear, the British planned to take the islands of the Dodecanese in an operation code-named 'Mandibles'. But shipping, already scarce, could not be found for Mandibles as well as Lustre, and so the political priority of sending Force W to Greece took precedence over the elementary military necessity of clearing enemy bases lying in wait on the Allied line of communications. And what the British Chiefs of Staff anticipated five months earlier is exactly what occurred during the evacuation of Crete, multiple ships falling victim to Ju87 dive bombers flying out of Karpathos, with heavy loss of life. Perhaps nothing better illustrates the military folly of the Greek campaign as a whole, but it

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<sup>23</sup> Naval Staff, *Naval Operations in the Battle of Crete*, London: Historical Section, Admiralty, 1960. A summary of the casualties for the British Commonwealth land forces, but not those of the Greek military, can be found in Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p316

<sup>24</sup> NA CAB 80/56, Chiefs of Staff Committee, 'Review of Our Policy in the Mediterranean', 18 January 1941

must be set alongside its overriding political virtue, of cementing American support for Britain's war effort.

In honour of those who sacrificed their lives in this deadly calculation of realpolitik, what judgement we pass on it should remain a continuing conversation in the military histories of Australia, Greece and New Zealand.