In our previous works, then Capt. Harold E. Raugh and I took too limited a Mediterranean view of the background of the Greek campaign of 6-26 April 1941. Far from its being Raugh’s “disastrous mistake,” I argue that General Sir Archibald Wavell’s actions fitted both traditional British practice and the general policy worked out in London.

In 1986 and 1987 I argued after long and careful thought since 1967 that Wavell went to Greece as part of a loyal deception of Prime Minister Winston Churchill, whose bellicose way at war was the antithesis of Wavell’s own professionalism. Further, whereas Raugh took the narrow military view, mine was a grand-strategic approach relating ends to means.

My argument here is that a restudy of the campaign in Greece of 6-27 April 1941 utilizing the Orange Leonard ULTRA messages reconfirms my thesis that going to Greece was a deception and that far from being the miserable defeat which Raugh imagined, the withdrawal was a strategic triumph in the manner of a Wellington in Spain and Portugal or of the BEF’s in France in 1940. For this Wavell deserves full credit.

In this respect, then, the so-called campaign in Greece must be seen not as an ignominious retreat in the face of superior forces, but rather as a skilful, carefully planned withdrawal and ultimate evacuation. It was a successful, though materially costly, gamble.
On the other hand, Raugh’s American experience of war in Europe was misleading because in 1917 and 1942, large U.S. forces entered a conflict then in its third year. In contrast, in 1939, as in 1914, Wavell’s British Army had been a two-division Expeditionary Force. In overseas theaters British commands had to take risks with miniscule forces at the end of long supply lines.

The Corunna pattern of retreat to the ships of the Royal Navy had been repeated at Gallipoli in 1915-1916 and at Dunkirk in June 1940.

In 1986 I argued that General Sir Archibald Wavell, GOC-in-C in the Middle East, acted on the intelligence available to him which since January 1941 had pointed to the German transit of Bulgaria and confirmed that they would be in Athens by 20 March\(^2\). Already on 1 November 1940 the AOC of the British Air Forces in Greece had been given instructions to evacuate on his own recognizance\(^3\). After the politico-military decision on 5 March 1941 in Athens to aid Greece, the C-in-C Med’, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, had been asked if he had withdrawal plans in mind\(^4\).

**The Background**

Before the war started the British, including the Russian-trained General A. P. Wavell, believed Hitler would move East. From March 1939 British policy was to seek alliances with Turkey, Greece, and Yugoslavia, which could be sustained by British naval and air power in the Middle East. On 17 April 1939 the Anglo-French guarantee to Greece was seconded by the Defence Committee which agreed to provide aid and told Wavell that Greece was now number one\(^5\).

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4. Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory* (New York: FSG, 2004). The record of Wavell’s visit to England in August 1940 is without a diary of the GOC-in-CME’s visit nor the Military Secretary to the SOS War or the CIGS existing. So Wavell’s visit is recorded in War Cabinet Chiefs of Staff Committee of 3 p.m., 8 August 1940 (PRO, Cab. 79/6), War Cabinet 222 (40) minutes of the meeting held at 11:30 a.m., 8 August 1940 (CAB 65/8). Copy of a letter from the CIGS to the Prime Minister 10 August 1940 (CAB 80/16) pp. 145-146, and PM’s reaction of 11 August and the COS response of 12 August (CAB 80/16) 173-174, COS Committee of 11 August 1940 (CAB 80/16) 146-172, and COS Committee of 12 August 1940 at 10:15 a.m. (CAB 79/6) 68-69. The official records of the visit are in Air Ministry, Air Historical Branch, *The Middle East Campaign, VI, The Campaign in Greece, 1940-1941*. (PRO: AIR 41/28).
As Michael Howard noted, this policy was consistently followed into 1941 and “lay behind the ill-fated decision to go to the rescue of Greece, and it was not abandoned until after Greece and Yugoslavia had been overrun”.

After the blitzkrieg of Poland, the COS thought the Balkans the next German target. And the French General Maxime Weygand on his way to Syria stopped in Cairo and won over Wavell by his sagacity. On 14 October the CIGS signaled a defensive policy, whereas Weygand wanted an offensive one. But Wavell had hardly any troops.

There is a deeper background to the decision to aid Greece.

Back in London on an official visit on the afternoon of 8 December 1939 Wavell was briefed by CIGS Ironside in SOS War Hore-Belisha’s presence on the British view that it was not possible to support the French both in France and in the Balkans nor did Britain wish to help her ally only to have Gallic forces diverted to the Balkans, which lay in Britain’s Mediterranean purview. Wavell responded that the point was to win the war. The Germans would go east and not west so as to get corn and oil. The British could not man the proposed French line across Yugoslavia and Romania, but if German communications through Yugoslavia could be cut, then forces could be put into Thrace and Salonika. Britain could safeguard her own interests and protect Turkey, though the latter would follow her own interests. Ironside noted that after British disasters in the Middle East in World War I, Britain had to be strong in the Middle East.

So when he stopped in Paris in December 1939 on his way back to the Middle East, Wavell had a conference with the General Maxime Weygand, who had been urging General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall, head of the British Mission to General Maurice Gamelin, the French Commander-in-Chief, to get the British to repeat World War I and open a Salonika Front. Wavell declined; the British were not in favor of more gardeners in Northern Greece, as he had not the administrative and artillery support available.

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On 10 December the British delegation had found out that there was no Gamelin-Weygand Plan for the Balkans. Thus they only agreed not to intervene in the Balkans so as not to upset Italy. If in 1940 any action was to be taken it would have to build from the rear with sufficient air strength to protect an expeditionary force from the Luftwaffe.

On 16 December 1939 Lord Gort, the Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, met at the French Northeast Zone headquarters at La Ferté by General Georges’ invitation with Weygand. The French, of course, had been involved at Salonika, 1916-1919\(^{10}\), and had in the interwar years attempted to build the Little Entente in Eastern Europe, a bloc which Hitler had dismantled when he seized Czechoslovakia. Weygand and Wavell had arrived in Paris a few days earlier. They then met Gort and his chief of staff (and diarist) Colonel Henry Pownall, at La Ferté.

Pownall was properly skeptical of Weygand’s proposal, being anti-French and viewing them as always having great projects based upon virtually no planning. Moreover, any plan that relied upon Soviet help in the Black Sea and Southeast Europe was on very slippery foundations as the area was a Russia sphere of influence.

After they left Georges, Pownall noted that the first consideration was administrative—“‘x’ divisions need ‘y’ tons of shipping to transport them and ‘z’ tons to maintain them.” As Pownall saw it correctly, the French were great proposers of schemes, but failed to do the necessary sums to see if they were feasible. He recalled the Mediterranean problems of the First World War and the current U-boat assault on British shipping. Amongst others that had started soundly, Salonika had gone from 297,000 Allied soldiers in May 1915 to 670,000 in May two years later. And the future in the west, which Gort and Pownall saw in December 1939 as the key to victory, was already in an unbalance of 110 Allied divisions facing 200 German, operating on interior rail lines. Southeast Europe could not produce a war-winning decisive victory nor could the Balkan countries’ divisions be considered the equal of Western European ones. A further weakness was the leakage of plans when forces were not already en route. And lastly, the British analysis pointed to something of which Wavell would be made aware again in Spring 1941, the high rate of malarial sickness in Salonika—six-fold that of battle casualties in the Great War.

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Pownall’s notes were passed on to Ismay, the Secretary of the War Cabinet, and a few days later Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met Pownall at BEF HQs and they surveyed the state of Europe\textsuperscript{11}.

But by February 1940 London had changed its mind\textsuperscript{12}. In that same month Anthony Eden, then the Dominion Secretary, went to Cairo to meet the ANZAC forces due there shortly. In fact the journey was to see for himself the position. In Cairo he met Wavell for the first time, liked and admired him. Eden had been in the 60\textsuperscript{th} Rifles in World War I and was much at home inspecting troops\textsuperscript{13}. What he saw were alarmingly weak British and French forces with little prospect of rearming. After he got home, in Robert Rhodes James’ words, he was drawn to his former \textit{bête noir}, Churchill\textsuperscript{14}. On 10 May when WSC became Prime Minister, Eden was made Secretary of State for War, but not a member of the Cabinet.

Sir John Dill had become CIGS after a short stint in April at VCIGS, and Eden quickly formed a warm friendship with this able general, whom Churchill mocked\textsuperscript{15}.

After Dunkirk, in which Britain lost six destroyers and 24 other vessels out of the 222 warships, and 665 other craft employed, and the army lost almost all of its equipment\textsuperscript{16}, Churchill wanted six battalions from the Middle East. But Wavell refused and Eden backed him up.

Dill and Wavell never mastered the art of handling the PM. WSC was at times tactless and infuriating. Wavell only stayed on in summer 1940 after WSC had lectured him as to where his battalions ought to be, because Eden persuaded him not to resign.

During and after the May-June 1940 campaign in France, Wavell drew up appreciations gleaned from newspapers. He noted after 24 June that he had not realized the morale disintegration of the French since 1918 nor the extent to which there was a reverence for rank that stifled independence nor how

\textsuperscript{11} The Pownall Diaries, 268-269 and Talbot Conlay, “France and the Phoney War, 1939-1940” in Robert Bayse (ed.) \textit{French Foreign and Defence Policy, 1918-1940: the decline and fall of a great power} (London: LSE/Routledge 1995). This meeting is also described by Sir John Kennedy, who was present (\textit{The Business of War} (New York: Morrow. 1958) 40-44.

\textsuperscript{12} Marshall-Cornwall, \textit{Wars and Rumors of War: a memoir}. 185.


\textsuperscript{14} Robert Rhodes-James, 224.

\textsuperscript{15} Alex Danchev, “Dilly Dally,” \textit{Journal of Contemporary History}. 1 January 1987, 21-44.

subservient the French senior officers had been when he visited France in 1934-1935.

To fuller understand Wavell’s actions in 1941, it is necessary to revisit some aspects of the BEF in France, notably that it was commanded by General Lord Gort VC, one of the Staff College clique of Wavell, Alan Brooke, and Dill17. The BEF was motorized and had in Spring 1940 been reorganized so that the Royal Corps of Signals was central to its command structure. The Germans attacked on 10 May and had by the 20th reached the coast. The first BEF was cut off around Dunkirk with seven divisions holding 87 miles of front, or roughly 12.5 miles each, gradually shortening until almost all were evacuated.

Early in June it was decided to send out a second BEF to France to join the 100,000 British base troops and the depleted 1st Armoured Division and the 51st Highland, which soon was forced to surrender on 12 June.

Before leaving the War Office to take command of this second BEF, Brooke told the SOS War, Eden, that his mission as GOC had no military value and no chance of success. He landed in France on the 13th and on the 14th Weygand, the new French Generalissimo, told him the position was hopeless. General Georges, the commander in the Northeast, argued for a Breton Redoubt18, which needed 15 divisions to hold a 150 km line. Brooke had four; Georges none. Marshall-Cornwall had, on Churchill’s orders, studied the matter and told Brooke his conclusions on the 13th. Brooke at once told London not to send any more troops and to reconsider the “absurdity” of the plan. He added that he would evacuate at once. He had to tell WSC personally by telephone, after an argument, that there was no point in sacrificing the newly arrived 52nd Division. Interestingly Churchill had not yet met Brooke, nor Wavell19.

The GOC, BEF, then ordered Marshall-Cornwall to take charge of all troops (Norman Force), to withdraw to Cherbourg and to reembark for the UK. The last 52,000 troops left on the 17th and Brooke on the 18th.

19. Julian Jackson, The Fall of France: the Nazi invasion of 1940. (London: OUP, 2003) 134, says that on 29 May PM Reynaud asked Weygand to look into it, but in the next ten days Weygand dismissed it and General Vuillemin of the FAF ridiculed it. It was replaced by the idea of sending two classes of conscripts to North Africa.
The one regret was that due to the confusion the stores and guns badly needed at Home were destroyed at Nantes. The British Army lost in the Battle of France 1,200 pieces of artillery, 1,350 AA and AT guns, 71,000 machine guns, 75,000 MT and all its tanks. Compared to the French and German armies, the 1940 British army was motorized. Everyone realized that almost all the Army’s equipment, especially AFVs, had been left in France. There was hardly anything left to equip the 13-14 divisions back from France in July 1940 nor the two divisions left in the UK now facing the German invasion threat.

When Wavell visited the UK in August 1940 we have mistakenly seen this in terms of his relations with Churchill20 rather than as a briefing on the fighting qualities, tactics, and equipment of the day.

Wavell was an unemotional man. Churchill was the opposite. During his time in London, Wavell had to write innumerable responses to WSC’s questions and ideas. These were courteous, rational, and unemotional. He gave the new Prime Minister a taste of what the Director of Military Operations, Sir John Kennedy, noted the staff spent half its time doing during the war—keeping the exuberant “General-in-Chief” from making mistakes with such hare-brained schemes as the proposed army raid on the Ruhr or seizing Pantelleria while failing to take Rhodes or to fortify Crete in 1941 for lack of means21.

If the BEF of 13-14 divisions had not been able to hold the Germans with the latter’s six panzers in attack, when it came to consider going to Greece, how could a British force expect to hold FM List’s 6-10 experienced mechanized and mountain divisions in road-less and rail-less country?

**Going to Greece**

In other words, if we now go back and look at the Greek campaign in the light of what Wavell knew of what had happened in less than six weeks in France, as Raugh and I failed to do earlier, we have a much more plausible explanation for Wavell’s actions.

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He knew that Gort and Brooke had had to make decisions quickly and carry them out at once to shorten the line and even to retreat, and finally to evacuate. He also knew that air cover was limited in May 1940 even when the fighting was in range of Home-based fighters and he knew the effects of German pressure on RAF bases and LOC in France. The BEF had had almost 500,000 men. Wavell might have had 120,000 for Greece, but in fact landed only some 60,000 with perhaps 8,000 vehicles. (See Appendix 1)

In 1940 Wavell had 55,000 troops, 300 obsolescent aircraft to face 415,000 Italians and 2,700 first-line IAF aircraft. By July 1940 there was an appalling shortage of trained men and equipment.

Moreover, Wavell did not have the benefit of the resources available for Operation Dynamo to pull troops out of Dunkirk and ports further west across the relatively narrow English Channel. From the Piraeus to Crete was 450 miles. From Kalamata the distances were only some 175 miles shorter. And Crete was not an island arsenal with Fighter Command overhead. Given the losses of the RAF in France—half to three-fourths of a squadron a day 8-18 May—Wavell and Air Chief Marshal Longmore had to be acutely aware that the sparse supply of aircraft and spares in the Middle East could not support a campaign in Greece, as indeed their telegrams on the subject indicate 22.

On his visit to Egypt in Fall 1940 Eden, now SOS War, was ordered by London to stay in the Middle East, which meant that WSC did not know of Wavell’s plans for Operation Compass, which was to him very frustrating.

On 2 November Eden noted that the British made plans, but failed to stick with them. So instead of doing the work to implement them, they deliberately did nothing. In the end they reversed themselves and improvised at the expense of the Middle East 23.

After the victorious Western Desert campaign of 9 December and the victory in East Africa, Rhodes James said, “Eden’s faith in Wavell had been abundantly justified.” If he had had more aircraft and armour, he could have taken all of North Africa 24.

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22. See the compiled confidential volume, *Cabinet Telegrams, ME 1* (1942).
Upon Lord Lothian’s death in Washington on 12 December 1940, Churchill seized the opportunity to get Halifax out of the inner circle and send him to America. He then brought Eden into the Cabinet as Foreign Secretary. He and the PM had a unique relationship and when in February 1941 he was dispatched to Cairo with Dill he carried sealed orders notifying him that he was Churchill’s heir.

Meanwhile, on 26 November 1940 Marshall-Cornwall was ordered to fly out to the Middle East as the only senior officer qualified to interpret Turkish. He then socialized with Wavell in Cairo till he left for Ankara on 11 January. He was present again on 20 February in Cairo when Eden, Dill, Wavell and Longmore discussed Greece. He and Longmore argued against getting the weak and ill-equipped Turks involved. On Churchill’s orders he was told to persuade President İnönü to aid Greece, but the Turk just laughed as he knew how weak the British in the Middle East were.

The August 1940 Visit

Wavell was ordered Home to visit the new Prime Minister, WSC, in August 1940, and arrived in London on Thursday, 8 August, after a 24-hour flight from Cairo, which included being attacked near Panteleria by one aircraft and over the Bay of Biscay by a German Ju-88.

Whether evidence exists or not, he must have been briefed by the War Office and the CIGS as to what had happened in France, and surely he talked to his coterie of friends in the High Command—Alan Brooke, Montgomery, Fortune, ACM Barratt, Marshall-Cornwall, Ironside and Gort—so he had a good idea of German capabilities, British attempted responsibilities, the Breton Redoubt, and the like. He would have been able to check the lengths of divisional fronts, the needs of mobility, the value of resources, especially transport, the realities of air cover and the need for airfields. Wavell was a GOC-in-C and no fool.

27. It seems very strange but neither my professional researcher nor I have been able to track down an official record of the GOC-in-CME’s visit. There does not now appear to exist in the National Archives (the former PRO) the SOS’ appointments book, or the records of his Military Secretary. What we do have are Cabinet and War Cabinet minutes (CAB and DEF series), etc., and courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. John Shearer, a copy of Wavell’s Director of Military Intelligence, Brigadier Eric James Shearer’s handwritten memoir, said to be based upon a diary and sometimes in error as to dates. What follows here is based upon official papers, Connell, and Eden. See also note 3.
On the 10th his good friend Brooke was summoned to the Secretary of War’s office and they had a two-hour professional conversation. This meeting with the Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces, is especially significant even though there is no record of it. We must assume that since Brooke had been commander of the Second Army Corps, BEF, when its four divisions withstood 17 German ones on the way to Dunkirk (28 May) and then had been sent back to France in June 1940 to command the Second BEF and at once determined to withdraw it because the French were in a hopeless situation and the Breton Redoubt was a dream, that he was experienced and could provide firsthand information on opposing the Germans.

Wavell also saw others as Brigadier Eric James Shearer’s diary makes plain. However, being tight-lipped was a useful characteristic that Wavell had at least had reinforced by his sojourn in Russia before World War I, and by his knowledge of Cairo when he was with Allenby in 1917-1918.

Wavell had both a strong sense of duty and of professionalism and of the gray battlefield between politicians and their commanders. Ian Beckett noted in 1991 that Wavell was an untypical soldier, a man of many interests, but with such a reserved nature that he was seen as taciturn and unresponsive28.

Churchill could not stand soldiers like Dill and Wavell. They responded rationally and respectfully, not as House of Commons debaters, hostile and stimulating friends opposing his ideas and stimulating new compromises, or occasional abandonment. The Prime Minister and Minister of Defence loved combat, whether at Omdurman or at Chequers, where he sometimes marched up and down doing rifle drill. The generals were not amused by that or his late hours.

The BEF had operated with modern, well-equipped divisions in well roaded and mapped country. And Brooke would have emphasized that the Germans were well-trained, well-equipped with quicksilver operational minds. While Tommies could individually stand up to the Germans, the generals and staff did not think and act quickly enough. The BEF was saved by being motorized, by the Luftwaffe not being a war-winner, and by evacuations being planned ahead.

There is no doubt at all that Brooke clearly described the dangers of *blitzkrieg* to an army such as the British which lacked air support and reconnaissance, which thought still largely at infantry speed and which was under-equipped with anti-tank guns. Wavell both as a general and as an historian would have grasped the picture in France in May-June 1940 long before the “lessons” reached the Middle East in 1941. It was his job as a GOC to do so.

The week of 8 August was one of bad weather that forced the postponement of Goering’s *Operation Eagle*. London was a hive of great tension and Churchill was pressed to the limit.

At 10 a.m. on 8th August Eden had a long talk with Wavell about his needs, then met with the Middle East Committee of the Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff. Eden thought Wavell gave a masterly account, noting that the real danger would not arise until German armour and motorized units appeared.

On the evening of the 11th Eden, Dill and Wavell met the PM at Chequers. Wavell was not to be drawn out nor to make an effort to please. There was agreement on reinforcements for the Middle East –not much at all by later standards– 154 tanks, 48 AT guns, 20 light Bofors AA guns, 48 25 pdn field guns, etc. A generous gesture in view of the losses in France and the threat of invasion.

Eden chaired the Middle East Committee which got from the COSC the list of deficiencies in the Middle East on the afternoon of the 8th. By 5 p.m. on the 9th the Directorate of Military Operations presented a memo for combining the proposed fleet reinforcement, *Operations Hats*, with a fast convoy. The Ministry of Shipping objected but Cunningham signalled he would undertake it if the need was so desperate as to require taking the risk of serious losses.

On Saturday CIGS noted only two fast MT ships were available. Churchill demanded a mission to get 50 infantry tanks and their personnel to Egypt ready for operations.

On the 12th Defence Committee sat from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. or later. During this the PM questioned the GOC-in-CME in detail as to where every battalion was situated and why. Not unfamiliar to Eden and Dill, but fresh to Wavell, who appeared at Eden’s office at 9 a.m. on the 13th clearly upset. He suggested resignation for want of confidence by the PM. Later the same day Churchill sent Eden a letter indicating Wavell lacked vigor and failed to concentrate his forces on the decisive point –not, in fact, a possibility in the almost 4 million square-mile ME in summer 1940! The problem was also that the PM proposed to move untrained, ill-equipped troops. Shortage of equipment was critical.
All during this tense time in London, WSC and APW were arguing about the proper employment of South and West African troops then being trained in Kenya, about Kenya’s white settlers, and about the large British garrison in Palestine. Wavell was courteously and firmly negative. WSC was not pleased and though he dropped the issues in Wavell’s last two days at Home, he did not forget them.

In further discussions WSC refused to accept Dill’s judgment as to the correctness of Wavell’s dispositions, nor Eden and the CIGS strong opinion that Wavell was the best British general of the day for the task [the suggestion made by Brian Bond in the Pownall Diaries that Lord Gort should have been sent out in the summer of 1939 because he and Hore-Belisha, Secretary of War, did not get along, would have been dangerous; Gort was the slowest member of the Staff College clique]²⁹.

At 10 p.m. on Monday 12 August there was another Defence Committee meeting which Wavell, after a long session with the COSC, also attended. The COS argued that the two months’ passage via the Cape was the better choice. With the Battle of Britain, as Churchill had already named it, begun he was in no mood for caution. But he agreed with the Naval Staff. Wavell said he could wait, but if the Germans sent armour to help the Italians, then Egypt would be in jeopardy. After further general discussion the matter of the armoured Brigade was held over.

On the 13th the First Lord and First Sea Lord met WSC, who saw that if the attack on Britain failed, Egypt would be the German objective in September. So it was, Wavell was told by memo, decided for the convoys to sail to Gibraltar, due to be reached on 26 August, when a final decision would be made after RAF PRU of Libya to determine the enemy’s intentions. [This assumed the Germans could move very fast from France or Germany to North Africa.] At the time the RAF was very short of PRU aircraft and had only one qualified photo interpreter in the Middle East³⁰.

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³⁰. F. H. Hinsley, et al, British Intelligence in the Second World War, I, 208. One problem was that the spark plugs on Blenheims gave trouble on the return from Tripoli; the device not yet having been perfected.
Interestingly, during the War Cabinet meeting of 13 August, “The Prime Minister said that he had taken a great liking to General Wavell³¹”. But this belies all we know of the clash between Churchill as generalissimo and the well-educated GOC-in-C who would not surrender his independence to become Churchill’s man.

The Cabinet approved the reinforcements on the 15th, a day on which WSC held Wavell from returning to his command until that night he agreed that Britain “had no other commander as good³²”. Wavell left London on the evening of the 15th and reached Cairo by air 24 hours later.

Wavell had not only learnt deception and surprise in Russia in 1911-1912 and in writing the War Office handbook on the Russian Army, but also he had learned in Cairo in 1917-1918 the conspiratorial milieu in which plans were kept very close to the chest. Thus in Fall 1940 he had refused to tell London his plans for Crusader until the Secretary of State for War, Eden, could carry them back personally to Churchill.

One of the influential and competent background figures in 1940-1941 was the tiny LTG Sir James Marshall-Cornwall. He was on the Allied Military Committee of senior army officers advising the GOC-in-C³³.

On 14 June Marshall-Cornwall had sent the War Office an appraisal of German actions in France, pointing out that their success was due more to moral rather than technical factors even though they had superior numbers on the ground and in the air. The French were by this time hopeless, but the British suffered also from a lack of an attack doctrine, lack of knowledge of Continental warfare, and from no faith in infantry advances. British tactical doctrine had emphasized withdrawal in the face of the enemy. The British had escaped at Dunkirk and further west because their commanders had quickly made realistic decisions, ignoring their nominal French commanders, and because they were motorized, except for the RAF, and could move ahead of the Germans, thanks to stubborn rearguards.

Marshall-Cornwall’s experience is especially relevant because he was in Cairo in February 1941 and so Wavell had more of the same briefing he had had in London in August on German vs. British forces.

³¹ [To be supplied—RH]
³² CAB 80/16, 15 August 1946.
³³ Marshall-Cornwall, Wars and Rumors of Wars, 129-156.
WSC in London thought of the Middle East and the Balkans in terms of the colonial wars of his youth, and the British in general thought of the Balkans as a collection of comic characters in Turkish pantaloons. But Germans in France and the same Germans in the Balkans were not fuzzy-wuzzies. Wavell knew of the realities of war. He had seen the Russians in 1911, the Middle East in the First World War, and the French maneuvers in 1935.

By the time he returned to Cairo he had the necessary knowledge of German strengths coupled to his own weaknesses.

**Preparing for the Campaign in Greece**

Hitler decided in December 1940 to invade Greece in Operation Marita starting on 22 March. London shortly knew that the attack would start on 1 March and the COS urged on 10 January that Greece should have the fullest possible support for political reasons. They told Wavell Germans would dispatch seven divisions to Salonika with 200 Stukas. Wavell was ordered to see the Greek Premier Metaxas, with whom he concluded that the British could not offer Greece any significant aid34.

By February 1941 Wavell believed that North Africa was secure and that with the engineer Philip Neame commanding the forward forces their position was defensible, while the War Office had yet to tell Cairo that an unnamed obscure German general (who turned out to be Marshall-Cornwall’s old opponent in France–Rommel) was in Tripoli. Robert Rhodes James has concluded that in those circumstances Greece was well worth the attempt, which was not the case35.

On 24 February the Director of Military Intelligence warned that any forces sent to Greece would be lost and the COS agreed. But the Cabinet insisted. Ironically, Cairo saw little threat to Greece. The Joint Intelligence Center expected early in March that the Germans would attack on the 22nd with five divisions. As soon as British forces began arriving in Greece, to be greeted by the German Embassy staff, Hitler decided to conquer the whole country.

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34. Higham, *Diary of a Disaster*, 58-61; and *Cabinet Telegrams, ME I*.
35. Rhodes James, *Eden*, 251-253. Bernard Fergusson, a junior member of Wavell’s staff in Cairo, said later he felt at the time that instead of creating a classic Easterners vs. Westerners debate, it was an error of judgment. De Guingand strongly opposed the move. Sir John Kennedy’s *The Business of War* (New York: William Morrow, 1958) xvii.
“From now onwards, however, Wavell’s primary aim of liquidating the Italian threat to Egypt was bedeviled by the Greek chimera... a chivalrous but quixotic gesture” colored by political considerations. Wavell told Marshall-Cornwall on 19 February 1941 of the decision to go to Greece, and when the latter protested, APW said “strategy is only the hand-maiden of policy” – the policy of the Government is to build up a Balkan front. In the meantime Eden, Dill, and Wavell had been to Athens and it had been decided that the Anglo-Greek forces would hold the Aliakmon Line (a grease pencil mark on a topographical map) with a few weak divisions in spite of the Military Mission’s saying it would require two corps to hold it.

On 28 March the Royal Navy won the Battle of Cape Matapan and gained surface control of the sea. British forces, mainly ANZAC, began to move to Athens from Alexandria on 4 March in the first of eleven lifts, or 10,900 per lift, supplemented by troops being dispatched in cruisers. The intention was that by late April (the last flight was to have sailed on 18 April) the whole force of 120,000 would have been ashore. In fact, due to a shortage of shipping, only one and a half brigades were moved at a time so that it took at least two lifts per division of 14,000 men. It took a week to load and sail. The third convoy was held up by a storm and the fourth by the Battle of Cape Matapan. The port of Athens, the Piraeus, could unload 3,000 tons daily. A division needed 75,000 tons of shipping and 650 tons daily of food, fuel, stores and ammunition. Salonika was too vulnerable; Stilis, the port of Lamia, was off limits because of railway wagon storage, and Volos could only handle vessels of less than 6,000 tons and had only a fuel starved, narrow-gauge rail connection. Moreover, until the Suez Canal was reopened on 10 March 1941, he was short of shipping. Even using the Navy, it had taken six flights (lifts) and 21 days to put 60,000 ashore in Greece with

37. See note 36 above.
38. For the details of the Tatoi and other discussion, see Diary. See Monty Woodhouse, “The Aliakmon Line: an Anglo-Greek misunderstanding in 1941.” Balkan Studies 26: 1, 1985; and MG Francis de Guingand, Operation Victory (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947) and Generals at War (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964), 42-43. De Guingand was a major on Wavell’s staff in early 1941; in 1942 he would become General Sir Bernard Montgomery’s Chief of Staff.
their supplies, vehicles and guns\textsuperscript{40}. And owing to events in the desert, on 17 March Wavell had stopped all reinforcements to LUSTRE FORCE\textsuperscript{41}.

By 6 April there were on hand at Larissa and in seven forward dumps 58 days of supplies, 38 days POL (petrol, oil and lubricants), 70 days ordnance stores, and 14,000 tons of engineer stores. And these had been moved up country, mostly in British MT as the Greeks could spare only 400 of their 5,000 standard-gauge railroad wagons, the other 4,600 being used to maintain the 100,000 Greek troops on the Epirus front in Albania.

The first German strike on Sunday the 6\textsuperscript{th} was on the Piraeus in which the ammunition laden Clan Fraser was set afire and blew up while being towed to sea. In the wake of that explosion seven freighters, 60 lighters, 25 caiques, numerous tugboats and 7 of the 12 berths were destroyed. This greatly reduced unloading, kept vessels out for fear of magnetic mines (no sweeping gear being available), and left ships in the roads unable to take on coal or water.

On that Sunday the British forces in Greece of about 12,000 administrative troops and 33,000 fighting men were deployed as follows:

On the day before the German attack only the NZ Division was in place with the First Armoured Brigade on the Aliakmon, together with two weak Greek divisions. Of the three brigades of the 6\textsuperscript{th} Australian Division, the 16\textsuperscript{th} was at Servia, the 19\textsuperscript{th} moving up from Athens, and the 17\textsuperscript{th} was still in Egypt. (The blooded 7\textsuperscript{th} Australian Division had to be held in the Desert due to Rommel’s advance.) The British density was one man for every 1.8 yards of front, the Greek one per every 6.7 and on the Aliakmon one for every 48 yards.

The “Aliakmon Line” stretched west from the Aegean coast on the Gulf of Therma all the way across the mouth of the Monastir Gap to the Greek lines in the Epirus where they had been engaged with the Italians since 28 October 1940. The 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} Greek Divisions were only able to man their portion of the line with about 37 men per mile (or one for every 318 yards), hardly sufficient to stop one or more panzer divisions from breaking south out of Yugoslavia.

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The RAF in Greece on 6 April 1941 consisted of three Blenheim, one Hurricane and one mixed Hurricane/Lysander squadron in the Eastern wing, one of Blenheims and one of Gladiators in the Western Wing, and two Blenheim squadrons and one of Hurricanes and Gladiators and one Wellington squadron in the Athens area. Of these 11 squadrons nominally of 208 aircraft, only about 80 were serviceable.

The total for LUSTRE FORCE was eventually to have been 120,000 men plus 14 to 20 RAF squadrons. But owing to the limited shipping available these could not all have arrived in Greece until 25 April and would not have been on line until well into the contagious season for malaria, cholera, and other unpleasant sicknesses in May. And the RAF never had the additional squadrons to send.

In the end, by the time the Germans attacked on 6 April, between 58,000 and 60,000 Commonwealth men had arrived and were in various stages of moving north up the single road and railway to the Aliakmon Line. If the snows had not blocked the Bulgarian passes, probably no more than 30,000 would have been landed by 20 March, with the rest debarked in Crete where they could have, if still there, tipped the balance to the British commonwealth on 20 May against the German airborne invasion.

The claim that Wavell conducted a masterly withdrawal must in part be based upon casualties, remembering that like Marshal de Saxe, APW did not believe that a pyramid of skulls was a monument to good generalship, a comment upon Somalia that exasperated Churchill42.

The grand-strategic withdrawal in Greece has been detailed in Playfair, Long, McClymont, and in the New Zealand unit histories. Only a brief distillation is needed here of the activities of 6-26 April 194143.


43. This analysis of the campaign on the eastern side of Greece is based upon the following accounts: Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*; McClymont, *To Greece*; S/Ldr. Rexford Welch, *Royal Air Force Medical Services III Campaigns* (1958); for the NZ stories see the list in Higham *Official Histories* (Manhattan, KS: KSU Library, 1970) 348-350. Interestingly the official Greek history is based on the British volumes. Since then, in 1996, my *Diary of a Disaster* was translated into Greek by MG Konstantinos Kanakaris, who was my guide in 1979 and 1980, and issued by the Hellenic Army Directorate of History.
General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, the overall British Commander, and his deputy, the Australian General Thomas Blamey\textsuperscript{44}, benefited from the receipt via Athens of the Orange Leonard ULTRA signals which told them where the Luftwaffe and German ground units would be the next day\textsuperscript{45}. Because the Balkans had few telephone lines, the Luftwaffe signals were on the air and thus capable of interception.

The average rate of movement from 6 April was 20 miles a day. Claims of lack of RAF air cover were exaggerated because the British military commander, General “Jumbo” Wilson, was a proponent of an Army Air Force. In fact, the Luftwaffe was limited by the endurance and range of its Me-109s, operating from airfields north of the Monastir Gap. So it was not until on 19 April when they occupied the airfield at Larisa that the GAF could harass the British/ANZAC forces almost over the pass above Lamia, having successfully run the gauntlet of the long straight road across the Theban plains unmolested.

During the 14 days before the ANZACs settled in on the Thermopylae-Bralos line, the British had lost 222 killed or captured, and some 889 killed or largely captured from the Australian forces late in retreating, not a long list for a movement that had by then covered 605 kms (378 miles) from the farthest forward units at Florina, occasionally by train, usually motorized, but sometimes marching. While the majority had passed through Lamia, a small force had proceeded to Volos and crossed over to Euboea.

According to Long, the Australians had from the very first doubted the success even of a holding operation in Greece and had already in March marked maps for both withdrawal and re-embarkation.

\textsuperscript{44} There is no biography of Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, but on Blamey see John Herrington, \textit{Blamey: controversial soldier} (Canberra: AWM, 1973); S. F. Rowell, \textit{Full Circle} (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974); and D. M. Horner, \textit{High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945} (Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1982).

\textsuperscript{45} The ULTRA decodes of the German Enigma Signals are to be found on ULTRA microfilm by Clearwater of NY of 1979, a copy in the KSU library. We know to whom they were sent and we know that when General Sir Bernard Freyberg was in Crete in late May that Cairo was not forwarding these decrypts to him because they did not know his position. In the Greek campaign we do not know who received them beyond P/O’s Silver and Green, the Bletchley officers at Wilson’s headquarters or at D’Albiac’s in Athens because such messages were on flimsies which the Code & Cypher Officer burnt as soon as the recipient had read them, so they were not logged in. Thus there is no record simply because there could be no risking this ULTRA secret intelligence. See OL 393, 394, 395, 401, 402, 404, 406 and 411.
In the meantime, Wavell’s small staff in Cairo, led by Major “Freddie” de Guingand, had quietly been making evacuation plans and these were set in motion on the night of the 14th. By then air attacks from Larisa were harassing the artillery and others at Thermopylae. But since the GAF did not fly at night, as troops pulled out in their MT, they could use their lights to find the roads to the beaches at Rafina, Porto Rafti, Megara, Aghioi Theodoroi and Nauplion.

**The “Campaign,” 6-27 April 1941**

So what really happened when the snows melted and the Germans could advance? The following is a simplified account.

The British were warned early in April by ULTRA that the Germans would attack on Saturday, 5 April 1941; then, that it was postponed for 24 hours. The first news of the attack came from Major Reid’s special reconnaissance group, which sent a signal early on 6 April and at once pulled back. Down in the flat valley of the Vardar between Pella and Salonika, the advanced party of the Royal Hussars in their armored cars exchanged some shots with the advancing Germans and then pulled back towards the railway bridge over the Aliakmon near Eginio, which was blown on the 8th and still remained so when I saw it in 1992.

The retreat down the east coast of Greece was a consummate withdrawal, marred only by the success of the German paratroopers and glider teams at the Corinth Canal, and by the failure to evacuate the last 8,000 men at Kalamata, largely due to false intelligence which caused the Navy to withdraw prematurely. The Germans quickly drove through the Bulgarian passes and forced the surrender of Salonika on 8 April, though it took longer to capture the fortified Metaxas Line.

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46. See AIR 41/28 Air Ministry. Air Historical Branch. *The Middle East Campaign VI, the Campaign in Greece, 1940-1941*, and ULTRA OL 34. On the spelling of Greek place names see *Diary*, vii.

47. CAB 65/22; and Miles Reid. *Last on the List* (London: Leo Cooper, 1974).

48. This analysis of the campaign on the eastern side of Greece is based upon the following accounts: Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Sytia*; S/Ldr. Rexford Welch, *Royal Air Force Medical Services III Campaigns* (1958); for the NZ stories see the list in Higham *Official Histories* (Manhattan, KS: KSU Library, 1970) 348-350. Interestingly the official Greek history is based on the British volumes. Since then, in 1996, my *Diary of a Disaster* was translated into Greek by MG Konstantinos Kanakaris, who was my guide in 1979 and 1980, and issued by the Hellenic Army Directorate of History.
Against “W” Force, as Wilson’s Commonwealth command was called, the estimate was that the Germans had 23-25 divisions in Bulgaria of which at least six could strike on short notice. The British attitude in Greece was reminiscent of theirs in Norway – a British brigade could easily handle a German division. The Germans also swept down Yugoslavia, and passed through the Monastir Gap– really more of a shallow valley. They made contact with the hastily assembled 19th and 20th Greek divisions, and then on the 10th, with the Australians of Mackay Force.

From then on, as the following makes clear, the British strategy was to fight only delaying actions resulting in few casualties, and then to withdraw the blocking group at night, by MT if possible.

That this strategy could work in spite of the virtually total breakdown of vacuum-tube wireless sets, was due to ULTRA, which enabled the British to know where the Germans were. And so not until defensible Thermopylae did MG Bernard Freyberg, the New Zealander, allow a German concentration in front of him.

Basically the several lines of retreat were:
1. From the eastern Aliakmon via Platamon and the Pinios Gorge to Larissa.
2. From the Central Aliakmon along the axis Kozani - Larissa - Volos.
3. From the western Aliakmon through Trikkala to Lamia and Thermopylae.
4. From the Bralos and Thermopylae passes to the beaches east of Athens, and south of Corinth, and at the port of Kalamata, etc.

**Sunday, 6 April 1941**

New Zealanders blew the Aliakmon bridges and the Greek C-in-C General Alexandre Papagos ordered the withdrawal of the forces facing the Italians to join “W Force” at Vevi. The Australian Mackay’s “miniscule and ill-balanced force” was ordered forward to hold the Monastir Gap, as by ULTRA OL-6 at breakfast time in Greece, Wilson knew German intentions for the day. The whole force was mired in fog, rain, snow, language difficulties, and a shortage of trained staff officers. Nor was the terrain one with which British and Commonwealth veterans were at all familiar from sitting at Salonika, 1916-1918.

**9 April 1941**

The surrender of the Yugoslavs starting on 9 April caused the withdrawal, to a shortened more tenable Anglo-Greek line all across Hellas, to be underway
by mid-morning. There were no air attacks on the New Zealanders as they
moved to fresh positions.

Then Wilson ordered a further withdrawal to the Aliakmon Line and Papagos
followed suit on the 11th for the Greeks. Meanwhile, the Aussies struggled
forward to Vevi in deep snow on the 10th where they faced Feldmarschall List’s
now 10 divisions. Mackay was ordered by Wilson, who did not recognize the
problems of terrain, to hold for three nights while the Greeks withdrew—this
countermanded the Australian commander Thomas Blamey’s order to withdraw.
Already, by 10 April, plans for a fighting withdrawal had been shelved and
the New Zealanders were ordered only to make contact with the enemy and
then to withdraw south of the Aliakmon Line. The Kiwis already were by then
marching south to the Olympus-Aliakmon Line. Meanwhile, on the 11th, the
Germans were moving up to the New Zealand positions near Vevi and up the
pass south of Edessa to strike through to Kozani. There was contact on the 12th
at the Khaldi Pass, but it was cold and snowing. Two small German attacks
were repulsed late in the day without artillery, as the gunners could not see to
fire.

At Vevi, Mackay’s Force had three battalions strung out over 10 miles, much
too great a distance for any defense in depth. Mackay’s men were cold, hungry,
exhausted and frostbitten, as well as in contact with the enemy, to whom he
lost 11 men and a machine-gun section POW’s.

Early on the 12th, the Germans captured one platoon (10 men) and 5 of 6
anti-tank guns. The exhausted Aussies dropped their weapons and withdrew
over the hills to their vehicles. About 70 were captured during the night at a
German roadblock. One field artillery regiment had by then lost 16 guns, and
80 officers and men POW.

Both Greek and New Zealand withdrawals continued. The 1st Armoured
Brigade sent its B echelon back to Trikkala and Mackay moved his HQ back
to Perdikha.

By this time all units were retreating along roads and through country they
did not know, though they might have passed through it northbound a few days
or weeks earlier.

Saturday 12 April 1941

Papagos reluctantly began to withdraw from Albania, a move fraught with
political and morale effects. The 100-mile pullback required the bottlenecks
at Grevena and the Servia Pass to be held till the 16th. The withdrawal was the
subject of Greek complaint, as they did not have MT like the motorized British.
Sunday 13 April 1941

ULTRA OL-88 predicted a coastal advance to the southeast, and on this Sunday there was a minor action at the Sotir Ridge. This ended as the British rearguard began to withdraw with the loss of one tank hit and four lost due to mechanical breakdowns. On 13-14 April, the force holding Sotir was pulled out by MT. Late in the afternoon, Brig H.V.S. Charrington of the First Armoured Brigade’s HQ at Mavropiye, was attacked by tanks and suffered the first enemy aircraft strike. On the 13th, three New Zealanders were killed and three wounded in the Servia Pass by GAF attacks. Two days later, two companies of German infantry were destroyed there for a loss of two killed and five wounded, and 70 Germans taken POW. Three New Zealanders were killed in a late afternoon air attack.

During the 14th/15th, Charrington’s force had moved back 12 miles in 15 hours while under GAF attack, but casualties were low.

The weather had been abominable, so it was only on this Sunday the 13th that German air operations began from strips at Prilep and Monastir. The Servia area was hit by 21 Stukas. On the 14th, groups of up to 14 aircraft attacked and strafed forward positions.

The retreat from Domokos to Thermopylae was tough for the gunners, who needed three tractors and a team of men to get each gun out. When at last the mist lifted, two quads (gun tugs) got the last two guns away from exposed positions.

Meanwhile, FM List had ordered five divisions to attack the New Zealanders at Platamon in the Olympus Pass along the coast, and to strike down through the Klisoura Pass. That night Charrington pulled back to Kozani and then to Grevena. On Monday the 14th, the newly arrived Savige Force was ordered forward to hold the Metsovon-Kalambaka and the Grevena roads.

With the campaign just a week old, Wilson was now concerned that the Germans could move down the inland road from Grevena through Trikkala to Pharsala and thus cut off all forces at Larissa and to the northeast. Wilson’s staff did not know the Greek Army and feared its collapse, which was, in fact, imminent. Lastly, Wilson decided the latter could not retaliate, and ordered a withdrawal to Thermopylae. The critical decision to retreat was made not a day too soon. As the NZ historian W. G. McClymont noted, any delay would have cost the whole of “W Force.” Wilson later noted that GAF activity was on the rise, and the RAF’s on the decline due to attrition in combat and losses of airfields.
Wilson ordered MT to be used to rush the British back across the Thessaly plains the 100 miles to the new position, which was strongly situated along a 35-mile line anchored by Thermopylae on the coast, and the Bralos and Delphi passes to the west.

**Tuesday 15 April 1941**

The planners in Cairo had the day before completed the outline for evacuations. And on this day, Wavell told Wilson to expect to pull out of Greece. Meanwhile, the Naval Attaché in Athens had told the C-in-C Mediterranean Fleet that evacuation would shortly take place.

Papagos, knowing his army was disintegrating, agreed to the British evacuation; military cooperation ceased. Wilson asked Wavell to come to Greece.

At the time the decision was made, the ANZAC force was not in contact with the enemy, though he could be seen massing below the Grevena, Ventilikos, and Aliakmon passes. Air attacks along the Grevena road, however, were continuing from the day before.

On Tuesday 15 April, the 16th Brigade arrived at the Aliakmon, having abandoned their heavy gear, but had lost only 16 stragglers on a 34-mile march. At the same time, the 6th Australian Division had lost too many anti-tank guns to be effective.

On the 16th it poured rain. But the withdrawal continued. The Australians on Mt. Olympus above 5,500 feet in two feet of snow were ordered to retire. The New Zealanders captured 147 Germans and 30-40 Austrians, total casualties were estimated at enemy 400 to New Zealand 8.

Meanwhile, on 14-16 April, the Germans had launched attacks on the thinly-held Aliakmon Line and on the New Zealand company blocking the Platamon Tunnel. The next day the Germans, supported by 50 tanks, attacked the castle above the railway line on the coast. New Zealand artillery responded, but by the end of the day were down to 80 rounds per gun. The defenders were pushed back from the castle and out of the tunnel into the Pinios Gorge.

Wilson had thought the most dangerous action had been from the Monastir Gap to Larissa, but by the 16th he had realized that the Pinios block was critical to the final withdrawal.

The defense of this obstacle was entrusted to a very small force. By the afternoon of the 17th the Germans were working up the river with tanks while mountain troops were outflanking the defenders by climbing over Mt. Olympus.
13 NZ platoon, caught in the flat, lost one killed, two wounded, and the rest POWs. The four guns present and their 80-man crew were captured. In another engagement, the Kiwis lost three killed and six wounded, together with five Aussies killed and six casualties. The rest boarded trucks and withdrew. All told the Australians here lost 84 killed and wounded and 121 POWs. The defeat at Tempe in the Pinios Gorge was also due to three of the new 25-pdrs being sent back, and the other 11 on six miles of front not being allowed to re-site themselves more effectively for their new anti-tank role.

As four guns pulled away, they were bombed ineffectively by Stukas. Two other guns were lost after they got four tanks, in spite of being out of armour-piercing ammunition.

The British withdrawal from Pinios was complicated by night and the need to hold at Larissa until 0300 on the 19th so 6 Brigade could pass through. Orders to the most forward troops did not arrive, as the courier had incorrect directions—a major language problem existed in Greece, both for lack of interpreters and because all road signs were in Greek, a writing incomprehensible to Englishmen, especially dispatch riders.

On the withdrawal to Volos on the 18th, seven guns acted as a rearguard. Two of their quads were bombed, but they suffered only two wounded.

It was now decided that the New Zealanders would take the Larissa-Volos-Lamia-Thermopylae road while the Australians coming down from the west would use the Larissa-Lamia route. During the ANZAC retreat from their rearguard positions at Elason, the German pursuit was delayed by frequent demolition of bridges and charges laid on steep gradients.

**Thursday 17 April 1941**

On the afternoon of the 17th, the rain and mist cleared and the GAF attacked some columns of lorries.

23 New Zealand Battalion and 28 NZ Maori Battalion of the rearguard were on Friday the 18th evacuated by truck and were in Thermopylae, except for one group which arrived on the 19th. Though bombed on the 18th, the whole of 5 New Zealand Brigade had had few casualties.

By Thursday, the 17th, the Germans had 12 divisions in three Corps under von List, and another 14 under Weichs, against six shattered Greek divisions and the ANZAC’s two. It was not clear that the real German thrust was not in the west, but east about Mt. Olympus.
On the 17th, Wavell stopped all reinforcements for LUSTRE. Blamey made a reconnaissance to the north and then returned to Athens to gather all the intelligence materiel he could on evacuation facilities. The 6th NZ Brigade had taken the Larissa-Volos road and only arrived at Molos on the 20th, having been attacked by the Luftwaffe north of Volos. Nevertheless, by midnight on the 17th, four out of seven ANZAC brigades hidden by rain or mist had safely arrived at Domokos, Lamia, or Thermopylae.

Friday 18 April 1941

On this Friday, the 18th, the Luftwaffe had its best chance as traffic was nose-to-tail on the Larissa-Lamia road, which ran almost straight across the Theban plains. Accounts vary, but it seems that apart from a lucky hit on an ammunition vehicle on the embankment up to the Pharsala bridge which cratered the approach, only a few vehicles were hit and burned.

At this point the attacks were greatly exaggerated due to lack of anti-aircraft guns, to a 10-mile traffic jam while the Engineers repaired the road, and to the officers and men being tired, cold, hungry, and apprehensive. Not only were the inexperienced troops not yet inured to strafing, but the steady refusal of the RAF before the war to take Army Cooperation seriously meant that trucks were not fitted with AA machine guns, for they had not been harassed on maneuvers49. Enemy aircraft were noisy and nerve-wracking, as Gavin Long, the Australian historian, noted, but not effective. Once on the 18th the detour at Pharsala was opened, morale rose and discipline was tight. Soldiers always grumble, as do most motorists, in traffic jams.

As it was, the Germans missed a great opportunity. In fact, only about 12 other bombs hit the 112 kms of road between Larissa and the Bralos Pass over which the retreating ANZACs had to snake. There were no air attacks on this jammable stretch.

The reason there were few air attacks on the relocating Commonwealth forces on the eastern front in Greece was due to the weather and the radius of action of the Me-109s. At their normal full-throttle, this was about 80 minutes’ endurance. In the Battle of Britain this had meant that they could travel the 90 miles from the French coast to London and stay only 20 or fewer minutes in the target area. If delayed, some of them did not make it back across the Channel to their northern French airfields50.

49. AIR 41/28, 76-77.
That lesson was not lost on them in Greece. Operating from airfields around Prilep and Monastir, they could only reach the Larissa area, 203 kms or 127 miles away. So once by 19 April, the bulk of the British forces were south of Larissa, they enjoyed a certain immunity until the Luftwaffe were either based around Salonika, 105 km or 66 air miles from Larissa, or at Larissa itself. That did not happen until 19 April, which was just when the British rearguard were descending towards Larissa after having crossed the plain of Thebes unmolested. Meanwhile, on the 18th the Cabinet in London finally decided on priorities—Western Desert first, evacuation second, and the defense of Crete to be worked upon later.

The Prime Minister had now approved evacuation with Greek permission. The atmosphere in Athens was gloomy, even before the Greek Prime Minister, Koryzis, committed suicide. In the meantime, Churchill now wanted victory in Libya, while Wavell ordered Wilson, the political situation permitting, to hold at Thermopylae, the scene of the great Spartan stand in 480 BC, but now not so narrow a pass. The aim was to give time to build up the defenses of Crete and Egypt, the latter now threatened by Rommel and the Italians.

In the meantime, once the road south of Larissa was clear, Savige force was withdrawn from Kalambaka at 0130 on 18 April. The armored cars were bombed that night and suffered one casualty. Further Stuka attacks took place on the Pharsala-Domokos road, as did strafing, but casualties were limited to one gun team.

**Saturday 19 April 1940**

On 19 April Wavell and Wilson agreed that fighting to the finish was always best, but that a Greek redoubt (like the Breton) could not be held due to lack of food, insufficient shipping, and air cover, as well as doubts as to whether the Greeks could recover their morale. On the night of 20/21 April, Wavell drove up to Levadia and explained the need to evacuate to Blamey. On the 21st, King George II said there was no Greek army left to protect the British, and so Wavell said he’d have to attempt evacuation. Wilson was told to take Freyberg and Blamey into his confidence and to try to evacuate MT, guns, and those Greeks their government wanted out of the country. The news came of the collapse in the west of the Greek Epirus army, and Wilson decided to evacuate at once, starting the 24/25th. Blamey and the troops were told.

On the 19th there was a 2.5 hour air attack upon the rearguard at Domokos. Meanwhile, that day, the main Australian withdrawal was harassed by enemy
aircraft, against which there were no AA guns. In spite of an all-day attack, only six vehicles were put out of action by enemy aircraft, the rest broke down or ran off the road. In all, 17 were killed and 35 wounded. Gavin Long noted that these were the heaviest casualties the Australians suffered throughout the campaign.

On the same day, the Engineers lost two killed and three wounded to air attack at the foot of the Bralos Pass, while a bomb hit an ammunition train north of Domokos, but all six Australian railwaymen survived. South of Lamia one Australian became a POW trying to capture a Ju-52 troop transport which had landed nearby!

On the 19th, during the confusion of finding Germans on the Larissa road, and in attempting to switch onto that to Volos, 89 were killed, 20 wounded, and 30 made POW. In all, Allen Force out of Tempe was reckoned to have lost 750, about 30 percent of the total fighting casualties.

By noon on the 19th the Germans had Larissa, its airfield, and many serviceable vehicles, and halted for two days to consolidate. Larissa was 388 kms (242 miles) from Florina and 215 (134 miles) from Athens. Katerini-Athens was 440 (275 miles), and Salonika-Athens 539 kms (337 miles).

Further south, Mackay was worrying about holding the Thermopylae position, given the known German ability to leapfrog with paratroopers, their air superiority, and British lack of AA, limited lines of communication, and scarce to no support from Egypt.

On the 19th, the rearguard successfully held the Bralos Pass, and then ambushed the German advanced guard. Two trains got away from Volos, but the third was destroyed when a viaduct was blown prematurely. By now the New Zealanders held Thermopylae, and the Australians the Bralos Passes, but this block could also be outflanked to the east by crossing from Volos to the island of Euboea, or in the west via Gravia and Amfissa, or from the Epirus by the Delphi road now that Greek resistance was crumbling. Late in the day Freyberg assumed command from Wilson and Blamey of a confused situation in which units were scattered all over. Yet, in general, the retreat had enjoyed periods of calm, but was short of signal wire, tools, and anti-tank mines, as well as the troops being weary and cold.

It was 70 miles from Larissa to Thermopylae, but there was little or no RAF cover. However, on the next day two RAF squadrons were on airfields on the plains of Thessaly to protect the road. Most of the army did not see this successful defensive action, which netted five Stuka dive-bombers.
Losses to air attacks on the 18th, 19th and 20th in NZ Battalions amounted to five killed and 23 wounded, and some losses amongst the gunners. In addition, the rearguard lost six killed, four wounded, some in a single aircraft attack on the HQs, and one troop captured.

6 Brigade’s withdrawal was hampered by Germans south of them, and by 64 Medium Artillery running out of ammunition and 24 Battalion being out of explosives for demolitions due to the nature of the lifts from Egypt. But though caught in the jam at Pharsala, only one man was wounded in air attacks.

Sunday 20 April 1941

The GAF attacked Menidi airfield north of Athens and damaged 12 Blenheims. On that Sunday afternoon, 15 serviceable Hurricanes defended Athens against 100 GAF; five were lost for a claimed 25-30 (probably actually 8-10).

The 20th was quiet, but on the 21st, there were more air attacks. Most surviving tanks had now been dispersed to defend Athens. Lack of air cover was serious, but in spite of all-day attacks, casualties were only six killed and five wounded. The most effective raid was one up north on Levadia station, where three trains were set afire.

On 20-21 April the New Zealanders were at Thermopylae, the steep slopes were being wired, and slit-trenches dug, while the artillery engaged the Germans on the plains south of Lamia. The collapse of the Greeks in the Epirus resulted in the hasty transfer of 19 NZ Battalion west to Levadia preparatory to holding the Delphi Pass.

Monday 21 April 1941

Early on the 21st, Wavell told Blamey to evacuate as soon as possible in view of the surrender of the Greek Epirus army, the date ultimately being set for the 24th. On the 21st and 22nd the GAF sank 23 vessels and attacked two hospital ships in the Saronic Gulf near Athens.

By Tuesday the Thermopylae position was being abandoned, though Molos might have been held, as even this line was too long for two divisions.

On the 22nd the Aussies lost two guns and seven killed and three wounded after eight hours on the Bralos Pass. The Luftwaffe again attacked on the 21st and 22nd, and one was shot down by a Bren gunner. Athens airport was bombed, and raids from Larissa cost seven killed and four wounded.
On the 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 15 Hurricanes were given to the Royal Hellenic Air Force, and the remaining Gladiators were sent to Crete. Fourteen RAF Hurricanes at Argos were then destroyed by a predicted Me-109 attack, the remaining two escaping to Crete. This loss caused a shift of the evacuation to the Peloponnesian beaches. The GAF patrolled the easily visible road west from Athens to Corinth.

There was an attack on the MV \textit{Rawnsley} on the 22\textsuperscript{nd} but she reached Alexandria safely on the 23\textsuperscript{rd}.

That day, Wilson issued the evacuation plans for 24\textsuperscript{th}-25\textsuperscript{th} April through the 26\textsuperscript{th}-27\textsuperscript{th}.

Meanwhile, Freyberg assumed that he would have to hold for 14 days until he was overwhelmed, but at 0600 on the 22\textsuperscript{nd}, he got evacuation orders and began to pull back that night. The covering force south of Thebes would pull out on the 25\textsuperscript{th}-26\textsuperscript{th}.

Orders were to abandon vehicles not self-propelled, but not to damage the railways, and to give mules to the Greeks. Guns and technical vehicles were to be destroyed, but gunsights, Bren guns, rifles, ammunition, W/T sets and officers’ small attaché cases were to go.

\textit{Wednesday 23 April 1941}

On the 23\textsuperscript{rd} there were increasingly severe attacks along the Gulf of Corinth from Eleusis west. Dive bombers struck the medium artillery intermittently. The Germans began seriously to probe the Thermopylae line. On the 24\textsuperscript{th} they began a strong attack on the Molos axis, aided by Stukas concentrating on the gun positions. But the attack was stopped by the New Zealand artillery, which was well camouflaged, and which stopped firing when Stukas were overhead. The guns once again had plenty of shells. HQ 6\textsuperscript{th} German Mountain Division moved into Larissa that night (OL-142).

\textit{Thursday 24 April 1941}

Early on the 24\textsuperscript{th}, OL-146 predicted that the Germans would attack Thermopylae, with air attacks on Thebes and Argos as well (OL-151).

On the 24\textsuperscript{th} there was a limited battle at Thermopylae in which enemy aircraft were a nuisance. New orders were issued—each man to carry 100 rounds aboard ship, rifles and anti-gas respirators, but no entrenching tools.

By the morning of the 25\textsuperscript{th}, all of “W Force” was south of the rearguard at Erithrai and miles of cratered roads separated it from the German advance.
On the night of 24/25, both ANZAC forces withdrew and evacuated the following night. Four trucks were lost when they failed to heed orders and ran into the Germans near Molos, while two Bren-gun carriers were mistaken for Germans, resulting in two killed, seven wounded, and one missing.

On the 25th, the rearguard, called Clifton Force, and HQ British Air Forces Greece (BAFG), no longer getting ULTRA, tried to withdraw in daylight, but the GAF attacked them.

On the 26th, those not evacuated from Marathon reached Corinth just as the German airborne came in. GAF attacks had already wrecked all the AA guns. The British suffered 12 killed, 11 wounded, and 500 POWs. But by then 39,000 of the 62,611 landed had been reembarked. Meanwhile, the rearguard at Erithrai was under air attack.

Luftwaffe attacks were now common all over. Thereafter, what military action there was was simply to defend the evacuation ports, which ceased to be used on the 28th. The last 8,000 were made POWs at Kalamata.

At 9.25 hrs on 27 April 1941 the victorious Germans entered Athens, five weeks later than anticipated.

Postscript

The Battle of Crete opened less than a month after the evacuation of Greece\(^51\). The island was not in a defensible stance. Nevertheless, its fall was not inevitable. But it is true that from the 20th of May on, Freyberg no longer got ULTRA forwarded from Cairo, because the security of his position was in doubt and ULTRA could not be compromised\(^52\).

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Observations on the “Campaign”

In the end, 50,672 were evacuated of the 62,611 landed, some of whom were Greeks and others. Overall, British, Australian, New Zealand, Palestinian, Cypriot, and RAF casualties totaled 920 killed, 1,250 wounded, and 13,958 POWs. The Germans lost 1,160 killed, 3,755 wounded, and 345 missing. As compared to the casualties in Greece, the Waziristan operation in 1919-1920 cost 1,800 killed, 3,675 wounded, and 40,000 sick\(^{53}\). So the Greek deception was still a reasonable gamble, with the losses roughly four percent of those landed. One other figure supports the thesis that the whole Greek affair of March-April 1941 was a deception, a ruse, and that is the loss of motor vehicles. Wavell claimed 8,000, but that must also have been part of the fooling of Churchill. If the Germans only gained 2,170, and allowing for a little Greek battlefield scavenging, that still leaves over 5,000 vehicles unaccounted for, because it is clear from the story above that very few were lost in the 517-mile withdrawal from Florina to Kalamata. In 21 days of fighting, the withdrawal averaged 20 miles a day. As McClymont noted, the whole campaign was conducted by an inadequate force in unfamiliar country for which even maps were scarce or inaccurate.

As the attackers, the Germans suffered more heavily in killed and wounded, a tribute to the accuracy of ANZAC artillery and rifle fire. The low ANZAC casualties reflect the ineffectiveness of GAF attacks, but also show that the recriminations against the RAF were not justified, though there also was the ineffectiveness of the RAF in a defensive role due to paucity of aircraft, spares, recovery vehicles, and airfields in the whole Middle East\(^{54}\).

There were two reasons why German air attacks were limited. The first was the weather, which varied from snow, sleet, rain and mist in the first four days, to clear skies thereafter. Second was the range of Me-109 fighters. Neither Stukas nor other bombers were anxious to fly unescorted when the Anglo-Greek air force was unlocated. So attacks varied in strength and intensity according to the distance from a base.


\(^{54}\) AIR 23/6137. See also WO 201/126, the Salisbury-Jones examination of the report of the commander of “W” Force. The final report of the 2\(^{nd}\) Inter Services Committee on lessons learned was not approved until 2 April 1942. Specifically on Crete, see WO 201/199, and WO 201/121.
But as April passed, so the landing grounds dried out and the Germans, with their grass-airfield training, as well as aircraft design, could use many places the RAF had ruled only to be possible sites for developed all-weather airfields. At Corinth the Luftwaffe landed the airborne on fields the RAF said were too small, and so were neither defended nor obstructed.

Thanks also partly to bad weather, the Luftwaffe was not able to attack until the better weather, and even then not heavily until the 21st when they could stage out of Larissa. Better command of the RAF in a tactical sense might have made it more effective, including attacks on GAF airfields. But as it was, the RAF never had the initiative. The unpopularity of the RAF came from the troops’ fear of what they had heard or had experienced in France in 1940, from lack of AA defenses, from the adverse impact of the last few days south of Thermopylae, and from Wilson’s desire to have his own Army Air Force. Many of these attitudes would change in 1941-1942 as supplies became plentiful of AA, aircraft, adequate airfields, and all forces concentrated in the Western Desert. Out of the 17 days of the retreat, there was enemy air activity, not counting the 6 April attack on the Piraeus, on 15 days.

GAF attacks were thin until the 15th, when they became more frequent. But they were never heavy nor well aimed. Air attacks on 13-15 April accounted for 14 killed, eight wounded, and hardly more than those figures on 16th-20th. On the latter day, 12 Blenheims were destroyed at Menidi and on the 22nd, 14 Hurricanes at Argos. The severest attack was the day-long offensive between Eleusis and Corinth in which 23 ships were sunk.

In ways, it was surprising that the GAF did not do more, since it had excellent aerial photos of Greece taken as early as July 1940.

In terms of the direction of the campaign that never was, the Commonwealth forces were only seriously engaged from the 8th to the 24th of April 1941, or 17 days. In that time, they withdrew a maximum of 377 miles (603 kms), from Florina to Athens, in a well-conducted, skillful retreat and escape, according to a confidential understanding between Wavell and Wilson, with the help both of ULTRA and GAF shortages and wastage. Nor must the stalwart endurance and morale of the units be overlooked. However, the matter of discipline and training was commented upon unfavorably in the replaying.

55. WO 201/126. Casualty figures from McClymont, To Greece, 486-488, and Long, Greece, Crete, and Syria, 183-184; and The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean II. November 1940-December 1941, 268. The British army lost in the Battle of France 1,200 guns, 1,350 AA and AT guns, 71,000 machine-guns, 75,000 MT, and all its tanks. There were barely enough left for two divisions at Home. Guns lost in Greece, 150 25 pdrs, 144 2-pdrs, 32 60-pdrs, 84 light AA, 32 heavy AA, or 452 all told. AIR 23/6372: Air losses, 91 Blenheims, 107 fighters; 54 battle casualties; 53 abandoned; 6 Lysanders 92 battle, 4 abandoned). (Source: WO 106/3132.)
The failure of communications was balanced by the flexibility of commanders and the discipline of the troops. On the other hand, thanks in part to ULTRA, foresight, and to commanders who were flexible, the withdrawal was conducted with very few casualties and very few taken POW until the final evacuations. ULTRA certainly helped Wilson pull out ahead of the Germans so that, except on a couple of occasions, fighting was on not much more than at company level. Except briefly at Thermopylae, there were no battles worthy of the name even at the Corinth Canal (26 April) and the brief counterattack at Kalamata (28 April).

Demolitions did little to delay the German advance and the failure for political, economic and humanitarian reasons to destroy port facilities and the railways enabled the Germans to launch the attack on Crete within a month. Luckily, Blamey and Freyberg were both veterans of Gallipoli and its evacuation in 1915.

All in all, the Greek gamble cost the British 209 aircraft, perhaps 3,000 motor vehicles, and all the guns and armor sent over. These could have been decisive in the Western Desert, led to the neutralization of Rommel, and possibly to the capture of Tripoli, thus clearing the Mediterranean and relieving Malta—or to have held Crete.

Wavell’s gamble was made at a time when not only was he short of everything in Egypt, had his East Africa campaign just winding down and his Western Desert thinly held many miles from Cairo, but at a time also when the British and Commonwealth forces were not yet geared up mentally and physically for modern war, nor had they the resources for a campaign two-days sailing away in a totally unfamiliar theater.

This was not a desperate withdrawal in the face of strong enemy attacks, but a skilled pull-out which, if not for the Corinth Canal, which the British believed impassible, and the last timidity at Kalamata, might have seen almost all of LUSTRE FORCE successfully evacuated.

Forced to action, the British “campaign” in Greece was not ever a full-fledged one, even by the standards of the day. It was never intended to be. But historians then and now have insisted in trying to dignify a feint followed by a rapid grand-strategic withdrawal and occasional brushes with the enemy with the word campaign. It is an historiographical error to do so.

It is perfectly true that the British high command in London, which had not in 1938-1939 anticipated fighting in the Middle East, the Levant, or the Balkans, learned a good deal about the necessities of war. But it is also correct
that a basket of events led almost immediately to the removal of two of the three principal ME commanders. And while the various branches of the army, such as the Royal Engineers, did draw up lessons learned from the “campaign” in Greece, the Royal Air Force did not, but allowed WO 201/126 Section V to point to them. Moreover, Wavell carefully delayed the completion of the overall conclusions document for over a year. It can certainly be argued that he was otherwise occupied in India, but that was really only true after 8 December 1941. In reality, he still guarded his deception.

April 1941 saw Wavell coping with the consequences of February and March. Apart from the materiel losses, which the larger flow in the pipeline was making less drastic, the C-in-C ME almost won his gamble.

Wavell, as the premier British general of the day, knew that basically the troops he had at his command for any operations in Greece were not ready for serious war. The ANZAC forces just newly arrived in the Middle East, with the exception of the 6th Australian division, needed bloodying. To have put them up against battle-tested German troops in totally unfamiliar terrain just would not have paid even psychological dividends.

If the campaign was intended to be real, then those fighting it lacked knowledge of their allies, of the terrain, and of suitable tactics.

Having agreed originally with Metaxas that they needed 19 divisions, the British talked of making do with nine and sent three and a half. Hardly the mark of a serious effort, except on the part of parsimonious peacetime politicians— not yet converted mentally any more than the Army to the rhythm of modern manufacturing and war.

In early January 1941 Wavell and General Metaxas were very much aware of strengths and weaknesses and neither one wished to make useless sacrifices. Metaxas did not want another Thermopylae and Wavell could not afford another Dunkirk.

For a variety of reasons, the campaign in Greece was shrouded in rhetoric and myths that went back to the days of Pericles, including some modern ones relating to why the British were in Greece in 1940-1941, and to the lack of air cover.

The author of the Air Historical Branch, Air Ministry study, *Greece*, noted that while going to Hellas was regarded as a potentially failing political gamble, no one thought of what had to be done when the overwhelming Germans attacked. But this is unfair to Wavell; he had planned ahead and almost completely successfully withdrew his forces, even after Fate intervened.
Detailed study of the bottom end of events can and does reveal a different story than that seen only from the capital city and by the Higher Direction of War. The Greek campaign clearly showed that Churchill’s concept of a Balkan strategy was doomed to failure, certainly this early in the war.

Wavell was, therefore, quite aware that even a force of 120,000 men, say six British divisions, largely of infantry and no more seasoned than those in France in May 1940, could not stand against enemy panzers in a roadless, mountainous country such as Greece in 1941. He knew how fast the Germans could move and how hardened they were. Moreover, his supporting air arm was neither the match for the Luftwaffe in strength nor in conception of war, which meant also in weapons and equipment, nor had radar and sector control. And lastly, the GOC-in-CME showed Churchill that his desires could be met by the responsible commander on the spot, if not quite in the way WSC desired. War is always about risks and options of difficulties.

**Conclusion**

The outcome of the British-Grecian adventure raises serious questions as to the duties of a C-in-C and his responsibilities and loyalties to the political high command and to his country. Should there have been another Dardanelles-style inquiry to judge Wavell’s action? Was the use of professional judgment, even to the extent of deceiving the Prime Minister for the country’s commonweal, treasonous disloyalty? If the ruse had been successful, what would then have happened?

Strange as it seems, Wavell and Churchill had not met until the GOC-in-CME was called Home to meet with Churchill just as the Battle of Britain started. They were not compatible. And distance made them no more so. Wavell was ever taciturn and he was rightly concerned over the security of his headquarters and therefore of his signals, even though he had a secure cable connection to London and did not have to rely on W/T.

Wavell planned very carefully and secretly to deal with East Africa where he had a campaign in progress in late 1940, and with the Italians also in the Western Desert and inside the Egyptian frontier. He had great antipathy to Churchill’s insistent signals as to offensive plans. He did confide in Eden while the Secretary of State for War was in Cairo in the Fall of 1940 and managed to delay informing the Prime Minister until Eden went Home, and on 9 December the Battleaxe reconnaissance in force was launched and became a success.
As to why he did not agree with Churchill against Greece, I would aver that the reason lay in his irritation with WSC’s diverse suggestion of such unsound schemes as the capture of Pantelleria and of Rhodes and the Dodecanese, for both of which the Middle East lacked the necessary resources. He could not even spare a battalion for Malta.

Moreover, once Eden appeared on the scene again on 19 February 1941 as Foreign Secretary, accompanied by the CIGS, Wavell discussed matters with him as Churchill’s deputy. Eden invented means to a Greek end that Wavell and the Greeks knew were unworkable. Wavell allowed Dill to take the lead as his commander. Both counted upon the proposed Aliakmon Line being overrun before it could become reality. But the thaw did not come. This gave Dill time to go to Belgrade and to have reaffirmed what Papagos and Metaxas had told Wavell in January that a Balkan bloc was a non-starter in spite of efforts since 1935 to create one.

As a grand strategist and a strategist, Wavell well knew that his resources were not only inadequate but also entirely unsuited (especially medically) to a Balkan/Greek campaign where the losses likely to be sustained would dangerously jeopardize the security of the Middle East. The best he could do as March passed was to continue the deception by the slow landing of British forces, the preparation of a weak Aliakmon Line, and the quiet planning in his own mind of a skilful withdrawal to minimize losses of precious manpower. The “campaign” in Greece in April was designed to keep British losses to a minimum, knowing full well that the Greeks would surrender to the Germans as Greek leaders had no wish to commit Hellenic suicide, as Metaxas had told Wavell in January.

The GOC-in-ME no doubt felt after his meeting with the PM in August 1940, that rational argument would go nowhere and that in the meantime the mercurial offensive-minded Hussar itching for action would shortly change his mind again.

As to the matter of duty and honor: no general deliberately courts “abject defeat,” Raugh’s term. Wavell was no different. He astutely played a very sticky wicket with his goal being to keep the side in at bat until reinforcements could arrive from East Africa and the UK to allow him to deal effectively with the Italians in Cyrenaica and Libya so as to clear North Africa and rescue Malta. General Sir Archibald Wavell had the greater good of the British Commonwealth in mind and in his unfathomable mind that duty to honor that faith in his country overrode instant sycophancy to the Prime Minister. And he was correct. The end had to be tailored to the means at hand.
One final point relates to Wavell’s character—as an honorable Briton, could he have engaged in a possibly treasonous plot to deceive the Prime Minister. I would argue that in spite of all the strictures involved in the English equivalent of West Point’s “Duty, Honor, Country,” that there were precedents that suggest that he could. Wavell was in the Army at the time of the Curragh Affair, just before the 1914 War. Those officers mutinied, but were forgiven and continued to serve honorably. More relevant was the dispute between then First Lord of the Admiralty (WSC) and Admiral Sir John Fisher over the Dardanelles. The Inquiry noted that a responsible officer had a duty to take a fundamental disagreement on a professional matter to the Cabinet. Unfortunately, in 1941 WSC was the dictatorial head of the Cabinet. Reading the memoirs of General Sir John Kennedy, the Assistant CIGS in World War II, *The Business of War*, it is quite plain that the Staff spent a great deal of time derailing or thwarting the PM’s impetuous schemes for action.

Over and above duty and honor, there was patriotism. Wavell’s duty was to protect the Empire by holding the Middle East, which he was skillfully doing with minimum forces and support, much being kept in the UK against the threat of invasion. Wavell was one of the rare generals who saw the grand-strategic picture, and he was a realist as well as a gambler, and the man on the spot, in more ways than one. Knowing the mercurial nature of the former Hussar and that he was like a puppy in a fire-hydrant factory, I must argue that both Wavell’s duty and his patriotism in his very quiet way caused him to deceive the Prime Minister for the good of Britain and the Empire.

We have, moreover, other examples, such as the German generals’ 1944 plot against Hitler, General Douglas MacArthur in 1951, and the affairs of General Charles de Gaulle. In desperate times, cooler heads, such as President Abraham Lincoln in the *ex parte Mulligan* case in the U.S. Civil War, who acted unconstitutionally to save the Union, must occasionally prevail.

I spent nearly 20 years examining the case of the British in Greece and I finally came to the conclusion that the only explanation for Wavell’s sending troops to Greece was a deception not of the enemy, whose military attaché in Athens was well aware of the paucity of British strength, but of the Prime Minister for the sake of the Empire whose belt buckle, Churchill himself had said in 1920, was the Middle East.

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Unless Wavell’s autobiography is ever made public, we shall never be able to prove the point absolutely one way or another. But I believe the circumstantial evidence favours my hypothesis.

Whether or not my conclusion is acceptable, that Wavell made the gallant gesture of going to Greece with the intent of not being committed to a campaign there with totally inadequate land, sea, and air forces, I would argue strongly that the withdrawal and evacuation was skillfully conducted. Far from being an “abject defeat,” Wavell pulled off another Dunkirk and husbanded his resources. Crete’s inevitable fall was because he had tried to do too much with too little for too long. Even the ablest commander can only do so much without proper support politically and logistically—Wavell enjoyed neither. As Wavell put Dill on the plane home in April 1941, he said, “Jack, I hope that you will preside at my court-martial.”

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58. Source unknown.


Appendix I

Rush decisions such as Operation LUSTRE were taken without considering the effects on the economy both of the United Kingdom in terms of imports and of the Middle East in general. There was already a shortage of shipping when in early 1941 the Suez Canal was closed to through traffic for 45 days. The argument that going to Greece was a gamble and a ruse must surely take into positive account the fact that there was not enough shipping either to land a viable force fast enough nor to sustain it at fighting levels.\textsuperscript{59}

To move a division of 14,000 men with vehicles and stores required 553 long tons for MT and motorcycles; a 4,000-ton deadweight ship could carry 55 vehicles. To move 8,000 vehicles would have needed 62.5 voyages or at 12 ships per convoy, five convoys for vehicles and some stores alone.

Some 14,000 men needed daily at 6 lbs. for food and ammunition 38 long tons. A 4,000-ton deadweight ship had a capacity of 8,500 long tons and could carry 224 days' rations for a division. Wavell had in Greece a bit over the equivalent of four divisions, so one ship could carry 55 days' rations for LUSTRE Force. There then needed to be ships carrying stores, artillery and ammunition, POL, etc. The guns needed 100 rounds daily per gun for eight guns carried in 20 three-ton lorries.

Each of the two infantry brigades (of three rifle battalions each) required 396 vehicles.

The flights to Greece in convoy of 12 ships of 4,100 tons each provided 49,200 tons. The round trip took ten days plus loading time in Egypt and unloading in Greece, never a fast process. As the Piraeus had an unloading capacity of only 3,000 tons daily, it took 16 days to unload one convoy with ships having to lie off in the roads before and after unloading. Each convoy needed a 10-days' supply for those on board plus the crews and ships' fuel and water.

Adding the loading time in Egypt of, say 10 days, a convoy needed 36 days for a round trip.

The schedule of convoys was one roughly every three days in 11 flights (or lifts), which included most personnel though a few were sent in RN cruisers. The ultimate force was to have been 120,000 men, or 10,909 per convoy. The ships in the first convoy of 4 March would not have returned to Egypt until the 30\textsuperscript{th}, which meant that eight convoys, 96 ships were needed to make the system work.

\textsuperscript{58} Behrens, \textit{Merchant Shipping}, 211 and 241, 220-223. The average size of ships during the war was 7,500 deadweight tons (of 2,240 lbs.), the weight of the cargo she could carry (368 n).
If things had gone according to plan and the Germans had arrived in Athens on 20 March, perhaps no more than three convoys would have sailed, the rest being stopped as the enemy started down Hellas.

**List of Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Anti-aircraft</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACM</td>
<td>Air Chief Marshal</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANZAC</td>
<td>Australia and New Zealand Army Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td>AOC</td>
<td>Air Officer Commanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>APW</td>
<td>General Sir Archibald Percival Wavell</td>
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<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Anti-tank</td>
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<tr>
<td>BEF</td>
<td>British Expeditionary Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIGS</td>
<td>Chief of the Imperial General Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-in-C Med’</td>
<td>Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean</td>
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<tr>
<td>COS</td>
<td>Chiefs of Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>COSC</td>
<td>Chiefs of Staff Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>FM</td>
<td>Field Marshal</td>
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<tr>
<td>GAF</td>
<td>The Luftwaffe</td>
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<tr>
<td>GOC-in-C</td>
<td>General Officer Commanding-in-Chief or Commander</td>
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<tr>
<td>HQ</td>
<td>Headquarters</td>
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<tr>
<td>LOC</td>
<td>Line(s) of Communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>LTG</td>
<td>Lieutenant-General</td>
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<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Motor Transport/vehicle</td>
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<td>NZ</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
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<tr>
<td>OL</td>
<td>Orange Leonard ULTRA message</td>
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<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
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<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>Prisoner of war</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRU</td>
<td>Photo Reconnaissance Unit</td>
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<td>RAF</td>
<td>Royal Air Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>RN</td>
<td>Royal Navy</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOS War</td>
<td>Secretary of State for War</td>
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<tr>
<td>ULTRA</td>
<td>British decrypter of German Enigma messages.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VC</td>
<td>Victoria Cross for gallantry</td>
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<td>VCIGS</td>
<td>Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>W/T</td>
<td>Wireless</td>
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<tr>
<td>WO201</td>
<td>War Office file on Greece in the Public Record Office, London</td>
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<td>WSC</td>
<td>Winston Churchill</td>
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