



Crete 1941: The Battle and the Resistance

By Antony Beevor

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Crete 1941: The Battle and the Resistance By Antony Beevor Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #164785 in Books
- Brand: Penguin Books
- Published on: 2014-06-24
- Released on: 2014-06-24
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.35" h x .98" w x 5.45" l, .78 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 432 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Crete 1941*

“Few battles in World War II can surpass Crete for high drama, both on land and sea. Beevor, formerly of the 11th Hussars, writes about that battle with a soldier's eye and a historian's insight. Crete was a campaign unique in many respects, not the least of which was its ferocity. Beevor has a flair for re-creating the historical moment, and during sections of the text even the most detached reader will pause to catch a breath. He dissects the leadership of some of the war's most intriguing personalities, both Allied and German, illuminating their achievements and follies. His book is enriched with wonderful anecdotal material, some of which will both amuse and puzzle his American counterparts, whose military traditions are often so dissimilar. Recommended for both professional and general readership.”—*Library Journal*

“Excellent books have been written about the battle for Crete, but none, for me, has been as vivid and clear and exciting as Antony Beevor's. His unerring flair for the climate and the feel of the conflict . . . his insight and his grasp of these events make them seem as though they had happened last week . . . This brilliant book.”—*The Daily Telegraph* (UK)

“Excellent . . . an arresting account of the whole war on Crete, including the ghastly experiences of the Cretans under German occupation.”—John Keegan, *The Sunday Telegraph* (UK)

About the Author

Antony Beevor is the bestselling author of *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy*, which received the Royal United Services' Institute Westminster Medal; *The Battle for Spain*, which received the La Vanguardia Prize; *Paris After the Liberation 1944–1949*; *Stalingrad*, winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize, the Wolfson Prize for History, and the Hawthornden Prize for Literature; and *The Fall of Berlin 1945*, which received the first Longman-History Today Trustees' Award. He is the recipient of the 2014 Pritzker Military Museum & Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing. Beevor lives in England.

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PART ONE

THE FALL OF GREECE

1

Military Missions

On the night after the last British troops left the beaches of Dunkirk, a tall man with a glass eye said goodbye to his wife on the steps of the Oxford and Cambridge Club. It was the eve of his departure by flying-boat for Greece. They never saw each other again. A year later, badly wounded in the battle for Crete, he was shot by German paratroopers.

Although an archaeologist, and an Old Wykehamist of conventional background, John Pendlebury was a vigorous romantic. He carried a swordstick which he claimed was the perfect weapon against parachutists. In Crete it became an even more famous trademark than the glass eye which he used to leave on his desk to indicate his absence from Heraklion whenever he left for the mountains to confer with guerrilla kapitans.

Like many dons and archaeologists, he had been canvassed in 1938 by a special department in the War

Office known as MI(R) – Military Intelligence (Research) – a forerunner of Special Operations Executive. With an intimate knowledge of Crete from his time as curator at Knossos in the mid-1930s, Pendlebury was an obvious candidate for special operations. Yet no summons had arrived on the outbreak of war, and he had returned to England for a commission in a cavalry regiment.

The call had finally come in May 1940 as the German attack on the Low Countries and France began. The increasing possibility of Italy's entry into the war, and German interest in the Balkans, particularly the oilfields of Roumania, suggested that the eastern Mediterranean would be the next region of operations. Another Greek-speaking archaeologist called to the camouflaged colours of MI(R) in May 1940 was Nicholas Hammond, a don from Cambridge. He and Pendlebury were sent off on a rushed course in explosives, which became Hammond's speciality: an unlikely qualification for a future headmaster of Clifton and professor of Greek. Hammond was an expert on Epirus and Albania. In London, before their departure, Pendlebury insisted – more in playfulness than paranoia – that as a security measure they should always converse on the telephone in Greek: Hammond in Epirotic dialect and Pendlebury in Cretan.

Although older than the majority of those volunteering for sabotage and stay-behind groups, Pendlebury was one of the fittest. A well-known athlete from Cambridge, both as a runner and a high-jumper, and a member of the Achilles Club, he had been a friend of Harold Abrahams and Lord Burghley. In one pre-war season based at Knossos, he had walked over a thousand miles across Crete's mountainous terrain.

At little more than a day's notice, the four members of MI(R) destined for Greece and Albania were summoned to the War Office. They numbered Pendlebury, Hammond, a businessman from Zagreb, and another archaeologist, David Hunt, a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, who became a diplomat after the war. On 4 June, they were escorted to Victoria Station by an officer of Foot Guards in full service dress, riding breeches, gleaming boots and No.1 Dress cap. In the midst of the stream of exhausted Dunkirk evacuees his immaculate presence provided one of those surreal touches at which the British establishment inadvertently excels.

They boarded a flying-boat in Poole harbour and took off uncertain of their route. The German columns advancing deep into France forced the pilot to take a circuitous line, landing to refuel at Arcachon just south of Bordeaux, Sète, Bizerta, Malta and Corfu. At Athens, all except Pendlebury were refused entry because their covers of 'businessman' and 'civil servant' were thought suspicious. During that period preceding the Italian invasion, the Greek government was on guard against any British action which might compromise its neutrality.

Pendlebury, as a former curator at Knossos, was allowed to enter the country. He soon crossed over to Crete where he began to contact friends made during his immense marches and prepare groups to resist the invasion of such a strategically important island.

Hammond and Hunt, barred from entering Greece, had no option but to carry on to Egypt. There, they were attached to the 1st Battalion of the Welch Regiment in Alexandria. This regular battalion later demonstrated its military mettle in Crete, but for someone who had volunteered as an irregular the peacetime routine was suffocating. 'Every Sunday the officers gave a cocktail party lasting from 12 to 3 (champagne cocktails only) to the youth and beauty of Alexandria. At 3 o'clock, we all sat down to roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, although the temperature was fairly steady in the 90s.' Since Italy declared war on 10 June, two days after Hammond and Hunt reached Alexandria, this curious existence did not go on for very long.

That summer, while Britain prepared for invasion, and the first skirmishes took place in the Western Desert, the regime of the Greek dictator, General Ioannis Metaxas, acutely aware of the threat from the Italian army which had occupied Albania in April 1939, made every effort to avoid confrontation.

The government in Athens even overlooked the sinking by an Italian submarine of their cruiser Helle which was acting as ceremonial guardship during religious celebrations on the island of Tinos. Such exceptional moderation did them little good.

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Few military campaigns have been undertaken so carelessly as the Italian invasion of Greece, launched on 28 October 1940. Mussolini originally wanted to invade Yugoslavia, but Hitler vetoed the proposal firmly. Yugoslav raw materials were almost as important to Germany's war effort as Roumania's oil. In some ways it is surprising that Hitler did not also veto the invasion of Greece. He had plenty of warning of what the Italians were up to, and Mussolini almost certainly cleared it with him during a private moment at the Brenner meeting of 4 October.

The Duce presented his prospective campaign as part of a double attack on Britain's position in the eastern Mediterranean – supposedly the capture of Mersa Matruh followed by Italian domination of the Aegean. At the time, this accorded with Germany's 'peripheral strategy' of attacking Britain other than by a direct assault across the Channel, but Hitler had not fully appreciated the Italian regime's talent for disaster.

Emanuele Grazzi, the Italian minister in Athens, woke General Metaxas at 3 a.m. to deliver an ultimatum, without even knowing the details of its conditions. The diplomatic charade added insult to injury since Italian troops had already crossed the Albanian frontier. General Papagos, the Greek Chief of Staff, rang Colonel Jasper Blunt, the British Military Attaché, less than half an hour later. Blunt went straight to the offices of the General Staff where he found a sang-froid that was most impressive in the circumstances.

The popular demonstrations next day showed that the country had united instinctively. Metaxas's 'No!' to Grazzi is still commemorated each year on 28 October with the national holiday known as 'Ohi Day'. In the patriotic emotion, both Venizelist anti-monarchist liberals and the left temporarily forgot that Metaxas's royalist dictatorship had violated the constitution and suppressed all opposition.

Metaxas, with the authority of the recently restored King George II, had put an end to party politics with his decree of 4 August 1936. His rule was enforced by the police and secret police of his loyal supporter, Constantinos Maniatakis, Minister of National Security.

The endless preoccupation of Greek royalists and liberals with the constitution had long been little more than a surrogate battle enabling them to ignore the real problem of the country – the division between a self-absorbed capital and the woefully neglected countryside and islands. This failure of the two main parties, followed by the Metaxist dictatorship, which was known as the 'Fourth of August Regime', later gave the Communists their opportunity on the mainland.

Parallels with Spain were striking. The difference in the pattern of events leading to their respective civil wars lay mainly in timing. In Spain, Primo de Rivera's dictatorship in the 1920s bottled up the explosion for the late 1930s. In Greece, Metaxas's similar attempt to impose military order on civilian chaos was followed by the Albanian campaign and German occupation. This meant that the explosion was delayed until the end of the Second World War, soon after British troops arrived in Athens.

On 28 October 1940, Sir Michael Palaret, the British Minister, was cheered on the balcony of the British Legation by opponents and supporters of the regime alike. The Legation, a large pink and white mansion on Kifissia Avenue, had belonged to Eleutherios Venizelos, the great liberal statesman of the First World War, whose pro-Allied stance had helped depose the pro-German King Constantine, the father of George II. In Venizelos's native Crete, the outburst of patriotism nearly led to the destruction of the early seventeenth-century Morosini fountain in Heraklion because it was Venetian and therefore 'enemy'.

Reservists did not wait for call-up papers, they reported immediately. Wildly enthusiastic soldiery piling into troop trains fired an estimated million rounds into the air. Many units set out for the front on foot, since motor transport barely existed in the Greek army. In the Pindus mountains, men, women and children offered themselves and their pack animals to carry ammunition and supplies across the wild and roadless terrain. Within a few days the Italian advance came to a halt.

In the belief that the campaign would be little short of a triumphal march, the Italian army in Albania had not been provided with engineer units. The lack of strategy – a futile push into the mountain mass of Epirus instead of cutting across towards the key port of Salonika – exasperated Hitler as much as the incompetence with which the campaign was executed. He pretended to have had no prior knowledge of the whole venture.

Instead of a short sharp campaign which would have barred the enemy from the continent of Europe, Hitler found that Mussolini's action had triggered the British guarantee of Greek independence given in April 1939 after the Italian invasion of Albania. In Salzburg on 18 November the Führer made the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, understand that the arrival of Royal Air Force bombers in the region of his main fuel supply, the oilfields of Ploesti, was Mussolini's fault.

Hitler's concern for the oilfields increased further when it became clear that his attempts to lull Soviet suspicions aroused by German troops in Roumania had failed. On 5 December 1940, he finally decided on the invasion of Russia. The threat now of a second front on his right rear became a major preoccupation.

The original staff plan to invade Greece (Operation Marita) and Gibraltar (Operation Felix) as part of the 'peripheral strategy' against Britain's Mediterranean and imperial power had to be revised. General Franco's bland intransigence made 'Felix' impossible, and in any case Hitler, with his ambition fixed on Russia, had lost interest in the Mediterranean. 'Marita', on the other hand, had become more important than ever. He had to secure his flank for the coming advance eastwards.

Hitler's fears were exaggerated. The RAF's presence in Greece was much less of a threat than he imagined because Metaxas's government refused to allow the British to threaten the Roumanian oilfields. An improvised collection of squadrons under Air Vice Marshal D'Albiac – at first mostly Blenheims and Gladiators – was sent from Egypt to support the Greek army on the Albanian front. To avoid provoking the Germans, the bombers could not be stationed any further forward than Eleusis and Tatoi, both close to Athens.

For the advance party – who had been casually told in their mess tent in the desert, 'You're off to Greece tomorrow' – touching down in a Sunderland flying-boat at the naval air station of Phaleron near Athens was a moving moment. They were the first British forces openly back on European territory since the fall of France.

The young pilots who followed had the happy-go-lucky attitude of the time. In 211 Squadron, a number were motor-racing enthusiasts who had known each other from the paddock at Brooklands. Nicknames were compulsively applied to everything and everyone, with 'kites' called 'Bloody Mary' and 'Caminix', and pilots known as 'the Bish' Gordon-Finlayson, 'Twinkle' Pearson and 'Shaky Do' Dawson.

They soon settled into their new life. By day they carried out bombing raids on the Albanian ports of Durazzo and Valona – a dangerously repetitive pattern known as 'same time, same place' jobs. And by night they enjoyed themselves in Athens, starting at Zonar's, then going on to Maxim's or the Argentina night-club, where they rubbed shoulders, and occasionally came to blows, with unconvincing German 'holiday-makers'. At the Argentina, they used to chat up a blonde singer and dancer called Nicki after the show, unaware that she was the girlfriend of a member of Section D (another forerunner of Special Operations Executive) working under cover in the Legation.

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As a further gesture of support, and to provide 'close-up information about the relative merits of the two armies', Churchill had demanded the dispatch of a British Military Mission to the Greek army. GHQ Middle East received this instruction within a few days of the Italian invasion, and at the end of the second week of November, Major General Gambier-Parry was sent from Egypt, followed by a skeleton staff.

Although the Military Attaché, Colonel Blunt, was put in a difficult position, he and Gambier-Parry got on well. But Gambier-Parry was recalled towards the end of the year for a short-lived appointment as commander of British forces on Crete. His replacement was Major General T.G. Heywood.

Heywood had been Military Attaché in Paris prior to the fall of France. His refusal to acknowledge defects in the French army was an inauspicious qualification. Harold Caccia, the First Secretary at the Legation, considered him 'intelligent, but not very wise.' Heywood was a fastidious man. He had a muscular military face, with moustache, hard, narrowed eyes and a monocle. Ambitious and 'politically minded', he increased the size of the British Military Mission from little more than half a dozen officers to over seventy at one point, a growth which convinced many in the Greek army that his organisation was destined to form the nucleus of an expeditionary force.

Heywood also put his fellow gunner, Jasper Blunt, in an intolerable position. Blunt, a perceptive man, had accumulated an excellent knowledge of the Greek army. He was also the only British officer in Athens who had managed to reconnoitre the threatened north-east before the Greek General Staff vetoed further visits. Colonel Blunt, with his superior local knowledge, should have joined the mission as the senior intelligence officer, but Heywood had brought in his own man, Stanley Casson – Reader in Classical Archaeology at New College, Oxford – who although brilliant and a veteran of the Salonika front in the First World War, was rather out of touch. Perhaps the most eccentric addition was Colonel Rankin of the Indian Army in a curiously cut pair of jodhpurs and a long cavalry tunic which stuck out so much at the sides that he was known as 'the Indian evzone'.

Most members of the British Military Mission were either picked regular officers, or wartime volunteers with knowledge of the region. The chief staff officer for operations was a well-known Coldstreamer, Colonel Guy Salisbury-Jones. His number two was Major Peter Smith-Dorrien, later killed by the terrorist bomb at the King David Hotel.

The ranks of young captains and subalterns included Charles Mott-Radclyffe, a diplomat turned soldier who had served en poste in Athens only a few years before; Monty Woodhouse, a 23-year-old Wykehamist of stern looks and rigorous thought who a few years later in the rank of full colonel played a large part with Nick Hammond in thwarting the Greek Communists' attempt to suppress rival guerrilla groups; Michael Forrester, who was soon to distinguish himself in Crete as an almost mythical leader of irregulars in the battle against German paratroopers; and Patrick Leigh Fermor, described as 'an avatar of Byron' by Woodhouse because he had attached himself to a Greek cavalry regiment during the Venizelist revolution of 1935, and who later gave substance to the label with guerrilla adventures that were amongst the most romantic of the war.

Leigh Fermor's early career of itinerant delight has been well-chronicled in his books, yet en route to Athens his power of charmed survival almost failed. Coming from Alexandria, the cruiser HMS Ajax stopped off at Suda Bay on the north coast of Crete. He and Monty Woodhouse went into the old Venetian city of Canea for a drink and to smoke a narghile.

Afterwards, a private in the Black Watch driving a ration lorry stopped to give them a lift back to Suda, but he proved to be drunk and drove without care on roads which had 'gone artistically to ruin', in Pendlebury's

phrase. The truck overturned in the ditch and Leigh Fermor, who received a head wound, had to be left behind in hospital when the Ajax sailed. He finally reached Athens a week later.

The mission's liaison officer with the Greek government was Prince Peter of Greece, King George II's young cousin and an anthropologist who had spent a long time in the Himalayas. As a thoroughgoing Anglophile, with 'an astonishing repertoire of bawdy songs', he was greatly liked by British officers. The mission was hardly in a position to proffer useful advice on mountain warfare. 'The Greeks were certainly brave,' observed one war correspondent, 'but mountain warfare was in their view not suited to modern methods, and they reverted almost automatically to the tactics of a century ago.' Forrester, who worked for Salisbury-Jones, described the conflict as 'like one of the Balkan wars with somewhat updated weapons.'

The nebulous task of the British Military Mission was not made clearer by the unreal environment in which it lived and worked. Immediately after the Italian invasion, the Greek government had requisitioned the Hotel Grande Bretagne on Constitution Square as its General Headquarters: it was one of the largest buildings in Athens and had extensive cellars ready to serve as air-raid shelters.

General Metaxas took over the manager's office, the King was allotted a private drawing-room, and the reputation of 'Jimmy', the barman, as the best informed man in Athens increased still further when General Mellisinos, the Deputy Chief of Staff, set up his desk opposite the rows of bottles.

'The prize show of the building', wrote Colonel Blunt in his diary, 'was Maniadakis, the public security chief. He had a huge mahogany table matching his vast bulk. On it was an outsize photograph of General Metaxas in a massive silver frame, and a battery of telephones that would not have disgraced the office of any police chief of thriller fiction or film. Maniadakis would seize a telephone receiver in his huge fist and bellow for some distant provincial prefect or police chief, shouting not only to drown the typewriters, but also because he liked to shout. While this performance was going on, all his intimate circle of officers and friends who were clustered and seated round him, would hang on his words and try to hear what was coming through from the other end.'

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During the Greek army's astonishingly successful campaign against the Italians, the Joint Planning Staff and the Chiefs of Staff in London did not want British aid to go beyond the fighter and bomber squadrons already committed. One way of helping both the Greeks and British interests in the eastern Mediterranean was to take over responsibility for Crete, which the Italians wanted to occupy as a naval and air base. Metaxas suspected the British of having their own designs upon such a strategically important island, but at that time they were clearly the lesser evil. Despite the surge of pro-British feeling, Greeks did not forget Venizelos's phrase describing their country as 'the beggar of the Great Powers'.

In London, the views of admirals, generals and air marshals were for once in agreement, and Churchill concurred. With resonances of the Grand Fleet in 1914, he demanded that the large natural harbour of Suda Bay on the north coast of Crete should be turned into 'a second Scapa'.

Admiral Cunningham, the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, had already planned, with Greek approval, to establish a naval base there. The first British troops to be sent, the 2nd Battalion, the York and Lancaster Regiment, received their warning order to move within forty-eight hours of the Italian invasion. The 2nd Battalion of the Black Watch, also part of the 14th Infantry Brigade, followed in the next few days.

The dispatch of British troops to guard Suda Bay allowed the Greek government to bring the Cretan 5th Division across to the mainland. Harold Caccia, deputizing for Sir Michael Palairret, passed on the categorical assurance to the Greek government: 'We will look after Crete.'

This decision – a perfectly logical move providing the British fulfilled their pledge – was later lamented by the Cretans with justifiable bitterness. ‘If only the Division were here!’ became an almost universal cry when the German airborne invasion of their island took place just over six months later.

The Cretan Division landed at Salonika in the second week of November 1940. Due to lack of transport, it had to march across most of Macedonia to Kastoria, some seventy kilometres south of Lake Prespansko where Greece, Albania and Yugoslavia meet. The Cretans formed part of the reserve to the Greek army’s ten divisions on a front stretching south-west across the Pindus mountains to the coast of Epirus opposite Corfu.

During the second half of November and for most of December, the Greek army advanced valiantly against the Italians, pushing them back into Albania in spite of the wild terrain, bad weather and their deficiency in aircraft and armoured vehicles. By 28 December their right flank was established at Pogradets on Lake Ohridsko.

In this mountain war, only those used to the harshest conditions survived. British officers marvelled at the resilience of the Greek soldiers, equipped with First World War weaponry – much of it taken from the Austrian army – and ‘clothing and footwear of a deplorable quality’. Many were bundled in rags. During the march to the front, the luckier ones had been given civilian overcoats by pitying onlookers. It was the worst winter in living memory. Casualties from frostbite far exceeded those from enemy action. Only the walking wounded stood a chance of survival. Stretcher cases were almost impossible to evacuate. Resupply, both of rations and ammunition, was erratic since virtually everything had to come up by mule-train. Pack animals that went lame were shot and their carcasses stripped of flesh by the ravenous troops. On several occasions, RAF Blenheims had to drop sacks of food to starving, snow-bound units. Even water was a problem, since there was no fuel to melt the snow.

In the next phase, the Cretan Division fought on the central part of the front. In the last few days of January 1941, the 5th Division distinguished itself in the fighting for Mount Trebesina and Klissoura, an important road junction. A single Cretan regiment put the 58th Leniano Division to flight. One of the other enemy formations on this sector was the 51st Siena Division, which later in the war occupied the eastern part of Crete: in 1943, after the Italian armistice, Paddy Leigh Fermor smuggled its commander off the island.

Leigh Fermor, escaping the claustrophobic atmosphere of General Headquarters in Athens, did not pay more attention to the Cretan 5th Division on his tour of the Albanian front than to any of the others. The only differences he could recall afterwards were the cheerfulness of the Cretans in spite of the savage cold, and the way they carried their rifles across their shoulders like a yoke, because that was the way the island shepherds walked with their crooks. He had no idea then how important Crete was to become.

2

Diplomatic Missions

In January 1941, the Greeks, after reinforcing their army in Albania, had only four under-strength divisions left for the Bulgarian border of Thrace and Eastern Macedonia. The Commander-in-Chief, General Papagos, hoped that an alliance with Yugoslavia would enable them to crush the Italians in a pincer so that his divisions could be redeployed should the German threat from Roumania increase. Papagos, closely supervised by Metaxas, had handled the advance into Albania with sturdy skill, but his determination to beat the Italians became a fixation, and his tunnel vision was to prove disastrous.

The Yugoslav government of the Regent, Prince Paul, in any case appeared a very uncertain ally at that stage. Armies of the Axis and its inchoate allies lay beyond six out of seven of Yugoslavia’s borders: those of Italy, Austria, Hungary, Roumania, Bulgaria and Albania. And Prince Paul – Churchill later dubbed him ‘Prince Palsy’ – was buckling under pressure from Hitler to sign the Tripartite Pact. In spite of German

assurances to the contrary, this would almost certainly mean allowing Germany to use Yugoslavia's railway system to invade Greece. The Greek government had only the British to turn to for help, but Metaxas continued in his policy of not provoking Germany. He did not have Churchill's knowledge of Hitler's intentions.

On 10 January 1941 – the same day that Hitler decided to send a force to Libya to prop up the Italians and that X Air Corps, newly arrived in Sicily, attacked the aircraft-carrier HMS *Illustrious* – Churchill received confirmation from intercepts of German signals decrypted at Bletchley Park, a source later known as Ultra, that the German build-up in Roumania formed a grave threat to Greece. He promptly ordered draft contingency plans for the commitment of a British expeditionary force to the Greek mainland.

General Sir Archibald Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, was less concerned. During a flurry of signals between London and Cairo on 10 January, he argued that the Germans were basically engaged in 'a war of nerves'. Wavell felt his view was supported when General Heywood arrived from Athens the same day to say that the Greek government thought the Germans were just trying 'to warn both ourselves and [the] Russians off [the] Balkans'. But the Chiefs of Staff, following Churchill's directive, emphasized that his compliance was expected: 'His Majesty's Government have decided that it is essential to afford the Greeks the maximum possible assistance.'

Wavell flew in civilian clothes to Athens three days later for meetings with King George II of Greece, Metaxas and General Papagos. Metaxas wanted to prevent the British from sending a token force – large enough to give the Germans an excuse to invade, but too small to stop them. General Papagos, guided by Metaxas, stated that 'it would be necessary for the Greek forces on the Bulgarian front to be immediately reinforced by nine divisions with corresponding air support'. Wavell replied that this was impossible. He could make available no more than two or three divisions. Metaxas said this was quite inadequate, and to send a small advance guard of artillery, as Wavell suggested, would only provide the Germans with a pretext for attack. Papagos later claimed to have argued that British divisions would in any case be better employed in North Africa.

Wavell reiterated his offer of an advance party just before flying back to Cairo. Having faithfully followed London's instructions, he was privately relieved that the Greeks persisted in refusing such aid, for General O'Connor's forces were advancing into Libya. The Chiefs of Staff in London and the War Cabinet 'all heaved a sigh of relief' too, and so apparently did Churchill in private. Yet Churchill was conscious of broader political issues. Britain was constantly accused by German propaganda of letting down her allies and getting other countries to fight her wars for her. This latter jibe was galling at a time when 'Winston felt he must influence the Americans'.

Ultra intercepts continued to show that the German threat from Roumania was serious, and Churchill, whose view on the wisdom of sending an expeditionary force swung back and forth, refused to accept Wavell's argument that aid to Greece would be 'a dangerous half-measure'. His mind was fixed on the fact that Middle East command had 300,000 men on its ration strength, a figure which made him unable to believe that so few front-line troops were available. One of his War Cabinet staff later remarked that Churchill, although 'in some ways au fait with modern things', was 'much too ready to talk in terms of numbers of sabres and bayonets'.

Metaxas died of throat cancer on 29 January. German propaganda claimed that he had been poisoned at the dinner arranged in his honour by Wavell's ADC, Peter Coats, at the Hotel Grande Bretagne a fortnight before. The new Prime Minister, Alexandros Koryzsis, was a banker, not a professional politician, and he lacked the robust certainties of his predecessor. His government quickly indicated that it was keen to have British assistance in any quantity.

Churchill, inspired by his sense of British history in which the island race had created alliances against the overbearing power of the time, took this as the signal to create a Balkan pact between Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey. On his instructions, Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, accompanied by Sir John Dill, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, left London for Cairo on 12 February – the day that Rommel arrived in Tripoli. General Wavell, on hearing of their visit, resigned himself to a heavy commitment to Greece, and assessed his fragmented forces.

Perhaps more than troops Wavell needed sound information. Unfortunately, Heywood was passing back unrealistically optimistic reports on the Greek army's capabilities, almost a repeat of his delusion in France. Blunt's assessment was far more sober. He knew that despite its magnificent resistance to the Italians, an effort which had taken its toll both of men and equipment, the Greek army stood little chance against German armoured and motorized divisions with overwhelming air support. And since Metaxas's death, underlying political tensions had begun to grow between the still dominant Metaxist officers and Venizelists whose careers had suffered under the dictatorship.

Heywood's version carried the day, largely because it satisfied Churchill's craving for positive news. And there were still encouraging moments on the Albanian front to which he could point. On 13 February, the Greek offensive was renewed. The Cretan Division attacked north-westwards from Mount Trebesina, and again pushed the Italians back. Two days later they occupied the Medjigorani Pass and Mount Sen Deli. Heavy snowfalls soon brought operations to a virtual standstill. Several observers believed that without this setback the Greeks would have captured the port of Valona, and this might have brought about the collapse of the Italian army. Others were less persuaded. The Greeks had neither the supplies nor the transport to sustain their advance.

The air war did not slacken in the face of often terrible flying conditions. On 28 February, the RAF fought its most successful action of the campaign. Two squadrons, one of Hurricanes, the other of Gladiators, shot down twenty-seven Italian aircraft over the Albanian front in an hour and a half. This victory went some way towards mitigating Greek criticism of the RAF's refusal to deploy aircraft in close support of their troops, but at that stage of the war the RAF was attracting similar criticisms from the British Army: it considered itself purely a strategic arm.

At about this time, the Greeks received intelligence reports that the Italians had recovered sufficiently to plan a large counter-attack. This came in the second week of March with twelve Italian divisions deployed between the Apsos and Aöos rivers against the Greek front line of four divisions.

Mussolini, acutely aware that the German invasion being planned would put his army to shame, ordered his troops to attack 'at whatever cost'. During the week that followed, the Cretans in particular distinguished themselves by inflicting heavy losses. Their marksmanship, of which they were inordinately proud, was reputed to be the best in the Greek army. Within ten days, the great Italian counter-attack had petered out, but by then the situation in the Balkans, and indeed the whole of the Middle East, had changed. Mussolini's forces became a comparatively negligible consideration.

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On 16 February, the first skirmish between British and German troops in North Africa took place near Sirte. Four days later Churchill acknowledged the dangers of dispersing forces, and signalled Eden, Dill and Wavell in Cairo: 'Do not consider yourselves obligated to a Greek enterprise if in your hearts you feel it would be only another Norwegian fiasco.' But Eden, as the generals soon discovered, would not be diverted from his course.

Churchill, with his strong and at times over-emotional sense of loyalty to the Greeks and their King, longed

to help whatever the risk. On the other hand, he still wanted clear advice from senior officers on the spot, yet had given Eden plenipotentiary powers 'in all matters diplomatic and military' before leaving London. This may well have convinced Dill and Wavell that they had no option but to support the line decided by the Foreign Secretary. Eden had clearly become enamoured with the idea of surprising the world with a grand alliance – the sort of coup de théâtre of which diplomats dreamed. But, like Churchill, counting in 'sabres and bayonets', such illusions belonged to a past age.

Given the antiquated state of the Yugoslav and Turkish armies and air forces, a Balkan alliance could never have been anything more than a gesture. Wavell opposed Eden's attempt to draw the Turks into this scheme: it was the only time he spoke out firmly on the question. A Turkish defeat and German occupation of the Dardanelles would, he argued with justification, be disastrous. Fortunately, the Turks were clear-sighted enough not to be drawn into this deluded scheme. Aside from the German army massed in Roumania, they feared that Russia, their traditional enemy and still Hitler's ally, might repeat the stab in the back which had been practised on Poland.

On 22 February Eden, accompanied by Dill, Wavell and Air Vice Marshal Longmore, the senior RAF officer in the Middle East, flew to Athens. Before the first meeting at the Tatoi Palace, the Greek government, strongly encouraged by the King, declared its determination to resist the Germans whether the British came to their help or not. The British were impressed, even moved, by this courage. To their further approval, General Papagos conceded that a forward defence of Thrace and Eastern Macedonia was impracticable. He agreed that the bulk of Greek forces should be pulled back to the proposed Aliakmon line which ran from the northern face of Mount Olympus across and then up towards the Yugoslav border along the Vermion range. The safety of its left flank, just forward of the Monastir Gap, clearly depended on the Yugoslav army holding out against the Germans.

Eden, more excited than ever with the idea of a Balkan alliance, promised the Greeks 'formidable' resources, bumping up the figures of the forces available which had been provided in the staff brief. Colonel Freddie De Guingand, a member of the Middle East Joint Planning Staff, watched Wavell's dispirited support for the project with dismay. He, like many other officers later, found it hard to forgive him for not speaking out. After the meeting, De Guingand noted how Eden 'preened himself' in front of the fire while his subordinates congratulated him on a diplomatic triumph.

This military view of events does not tally with that of the Foreign Office. Just before the main meeting, Sir Michael Palaret organised a private lunch to give Wavell a better idea of the issues involved, and to warn him that with the death of Metaxas, the King had the real power of decision. To the surprise of Harold Caccia, who was one of the four present, Wavell, 'normally rather a taciturn man, became quite loquacious'.

He began by saying, 'Well, the situation in Greece is not that different from Egypt', and went on to compare the defensive properties of the Greek mountain ranges to the Qattara Depression. 'That means it's not really relevant to ask how many divisions are needed, since only a certain number can be deployed.' This, like many rushes of false optimism which influenced the principal characters – one suspects an almost desperate effort to conjure a virtue out of necessity – was based on the ill-founded assumption that either the Yugoslavs would stay neutral, or they would resist as fiercely and effectively as in the First World War.

Once the decision to send an expeditionary force had been taken late in the afternoon, Eden, Dill and Wavell left Athens. They paid little attention to developments in Greece for the next ten days: Eden and Dill went to Ankara pursuing the quest for an alliance, and Wavell was fully preoccupied by the problem of stretching already over-stretched resources still further. A frequent remark of his at the time was Wolfe's aphorism: 'War is an option of difficulties.' Meanwhile, De Guingand, in the guise of a journalist, toured the proposed Aliakmon line wearing a borrowed suit in a rather loud check.

On Saturday, 1 March, Bulgaria publicly joined the Tripartite Pact, and on Sunday morning the German Twelfth Army began to cross the Danube from Roumania over three pontoon bridges rapidly assembled by army engineers. Eden and Dill reached Athens a few hours later. General Heywood met them with even worse news. General Papagos had not given the orders for withdrawal to the Aliakmon line. He claimed that without transport there was not time, and that he had in any case been waiting for the response from the Yugoslavs about the security of the line's left flank.

How much Heywood was responsible for this breakdown in communications is hard to tell, but he cannot have been entirely blameless. He was not the person to provide the objective advice which Wavell so badly needed on the exhausted state of the Greek army and, above all, on Papagos's *idées fixes*: his refusal to withdraw from the Bulgarian border, and his refusal to consider the transfer of divisions from Albania, however grave the threat from the north-east.

Over the next two days, British exasperation and injured Greek pride grew in a series of fruitless meetings, which continually returned to the question of who had said what on 22 and 23 February. (General Heywood, in an astonishing oversight, had not kept minutes of the meeting for signature by both sides.) The Greek divisions in Eastern Macedonia were utterly exposed, yet Papagos still refused to move them back. His army possessed no transport and, he asserted, the British Military Mission knew that perfectly well. In any case he had been waiting for the British to inform him of the Yugoslav government's intentions, as he claimed had been agreed. Yet his obstinacy almost certainly owed more to a fear of abandoning Thrace to Bulgarian cupidity; and without the port of Salonika, there was little hope of persuading the Yugoslavs to join the Greek army in his cherished project of a pincer attack on the Italians in Albania.

Whatever Papagos's reasons and whatever the cause of the original misunderstanding, the joint staff plan had fallen apart. A poor compromise over the Aliakmon line was reached – Eden compared their discussions to 'the haggling of an Oriental Bazaar' – mainly because the first troopships were leaving Egypt. Colonel Jasper Blunt described the scene in his diary:

Our representatives sat in the drawing-room of the Legation; the secretaries came and went with telegrams; Sir Michael Palairet played host, the harassed King, the serious face of General Papagos, the deathly pallor of the Greek Premier, the suspense as the King and his advisers conferred behind the closed doors of the Minister's study. The minutes passed and I watched the scenes as a completely unconsulted onlooker. I was a spectator with a seat in the front row of the stalls at a drama as intense as any played on the classical Greek stage with the added interest that I knew the plot, the author and the players.

Blunt had guessed the outcome from the beginning, but out of loyalty to his ambassador and out of respect for the chain of command, he had not revealed his misgivings to Wavell's staff. Palairet only discovered his strength of feeling when they bade farewell to Eden and Dill at Phaleron. Blunt's quiet prediction of a *débâcle* shocked him deeply.

The commander designate of the British and Dominion forces, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, had already arrived in Athens. He had supposedly come incognito – a virtual impossibility for this huge, jolly general. Bald, moustached and round-faced, he had the Edwardian air of a favourite great-uncle.

Wilson and his senior officers felt that Sir Michael Palairet was over-influenced by the Greek King's Anglophilia, and that he still ignored the bleak military reality. After a fighting speech from Palairet 'full of Foreign Office optimism', Wilson was heard to say to his staff, 'Well, I don't know about that. I've already ordered my maps of the Peloponnese.'

The harbours and beaches of the south, as he rightly surmised, would soon become their evacuation points. Yet on board the troopships leaving Alexandria, officers of the expeditionary force, made up mainly of

Australian and New Zealand troops, eagerly rolled out maps to study invasion routes up through Yugoslavia towards Vienna.

They were disabused of such optimism on arrival, but not even Wilson, with all his cheerful pessimism, knew that the Joint Planning Staff at Headquarters Middle East had started work in secret on evacuation details – a precaution to which Wavell acceded with reluctance and distaste.

• • •

In Cairo, the final decision on intervention was taken when Field Marshal Smuts arrived on 7 March. At an evening conference orchestrated by Eden, Smuts's firm line was that to pull out at such a late stage was unthinkable: although hardly reassuring in military terms, it proved conclusive on political grounds. Eden was clearly relieved to have his support, for Smuts's opinion carried great weight with Churchill.

The following night, when the reply finally arrived from the Yugoslav government – evasiveness permeated every phrase – Anthony Eden turned up with his retinue at the Commander-in-Chief's house overlooking Gezira racecourse. Wavell and Dill were woken on his orders. They came down and, sitting side by side on the sofa in their dressing-gowns, had to listen as Eden paced up and down composing his telegram to Churchill.

Air Vice Marshal Longmore then arrived, also in answer to a summons, and saw 'the two weary soldiers, looking like a couple of teddy-bears, trying to give the Foreign Secretary's eloquence the attention it demanded. They both went quietly to sleep, and when Eden paused for comment only their regular breathing broke the silence.'

The next morning, after his early ride and swim in the pool at Gezira, Wavell spent a couple of hours at his desk. He then went into Longmore's office and laid the following verses in front of him without a word.

MOST SECRET AND VERY PERSONAL

The Jug

(With apologies to Lewis Carroll)

In Cairo where the Gypsies are,

I sing this song to my guitar.

('Only I'm not going to sing it really,' explained

Anthony kindly.

'Thank you very much indeed,' said Jacqueline.)*

In Athens, when I've met the Greek,

I'll tell you what it is I seek.

('It'll be nice to know,' said Jacqueline.)

I sent a message to the Jug, I told him not to be a mug.

I said he must be badly cracked
To think of joining Hitler's pact.
The Jug replied, 'But don't you see
How difficult it is for me.'
('It's difficult for me too,' said Jacqueline sadly.
'It doesn't get any easier further on,' said Anthony.)
I took a pencil large and new,
I wrote a telegram or two.
Then someone came to me and said
The Generals have gone to bed.
I said it loud, I said it plain,
'Then you must wake them up again.'
And I was very firm with them,
I kept them up till 2 a.m.
('Wasn't that rather unkind?' said Jacqueline.
'Not at all,' said Anthony firmly. 'We want Generals, not dormice. But don't keep interrupting.')

3 Secret Missions

Irregular warfare in the eastern Mediterranean held a strong appeal for vigorous young Britons. A cynic might easily dismiss the phenomenon as a sort of adult version of Swallows and Amazons, messing about in boats and treating the region as an immense adventure playground. Although many of them exulted in this new life because it provided an ideal escape from peacetime routine or frustrations, the diversity of their characters should be a warning against too simple an analysis. They ranged from Philhellenic dons to well-connected thugs, with many variations in between including a handful of good regular soldiers, romantics, writers, scholar gypsies and the odd loucheadventurer. The vast majority belonged to SOE, Special Operations Executive, created from the amalgamation in July 1940 of Section D and MI(R). (See Appendix A.)

A process of selection, unusual in wartime, led to a preponderance of archaeologists and dons. Paddy Leigh Fermor later wrote of himself and other 'improvised cave-dwellers' that 'it was the obsolete choice of Greek at school which had really deposited us on the limestone. With an insight once thought rare, the army had realized that the Ancient tongue, however imperfectly mastered, was a short-cut to the modern: hence the sudden sprinkling of many strange figures among the mainland and island crags.'

Those recruited into special operations seem to have sensed that these war years would be the most intense

of their life. 'What a lot of material for autobiographies is being provided,' a friend said to the traveller and writer Peter Fleming, who had been recruited by MI(R) shortly before war broke out. He should also have mentioned fiction. Another early member remarked that the same people kept cropping up in unlikely places round the Mediterranean: 'The whole thing was just like an Anthony Powell novel.'

Regular soldiers provided the original basis of MI(R). One of them, a sapper officer called George Young, was held at readiness in Cairo with a field company of Royal Engineers to move into Roumania to blow up the Ploesti oilfields. They were to be guided to their targets by Geoffrey Household, the author of *Rogue Male* and a more recent MI(R) recruit. Household travelled there with 'businessman' written in his passport, not author, because 'Compton Mackenzie and Somerset Maugham [both secret agents in their time] had destroyed our reputation as unworldly innocents for ever'.

The fear of forcing the Roumanians into Axis arms eventually led to the indefinite postponement of Young's mission. Soon afterwards when MI(R) in Cairo was reorganised into SOE's embryo form, Young formed a commando in the Middle East. This was eventually incorporated into Layforce, and he took part in its rearguard action in Crete described in *Officers and Gentlemen* by Evelyn Waugh, the brigade intelligence officer. In Waugh's crisis of disillusionment triggered by this retreat, Young was one of the few to retain his respect.

• • •

The most maverick enterprise of this, or perhaps any other stage of the war, was Peter Fleming's private army known as Yak Mission. Fleming, brother of Ian, traveller and author of books such as *Brazilian Adventure* and reserve officer in the Grenadier Guards, was already the veteran of one expeditionary fiasco, the Norwegian campaign. By shameless string-pulling – his father had been a great friend of Churchill – Fleming formed a party to reconnoitre Namsos by Sunderland flying-boat. Then, when the Allied forces landed, he attached himself to General Carton de Wiart who, with 'only one eye, only one arm, and – rather more surprisingly – only one Victoria Cross', was one of the inspirations for Evelyn Waugh's character Brigadier Ben Ritchie-Hook.*

During the invasion scare following Dunkirk, Fleming received orders to organise stay-behind groups known as Auxiliary Units in Southern England. Then, in the autumn of 1940, when the number of Italians taken prisoner by Wavell's forces in the Middle East began to rise, Churchill had the idea of forming a 'Garibaldi Legion' from the anti-Fascists amongst them. Fleming recruited half a dozen friends including Norman Johnstone, a fellow Grenadier, and Mark Norman, a subaltern in the Hertfordshire Yeomanry, who 'didn't have a clue what it was about'. Taking their batmen with them like characters out of Dornford Yates, they went off on an intensive course in explosives and close-quarter combat at the Lochailort commando-training centre in the Western Highlands.

Their code-name, 'Yak Mission', was inspired by Fleming's book *News from Tartary*. Issued with a ton of plastic explosive, £40,000 in notes and sovereigns, and Italian pocket dictionaries (since only one of them spoke Italian), they proceeded to Cairo 'with extraordinary priority'.

Failing to obtain a single volunteer from the prison camps, Yak Mission would have been disbanded had it not been for the German threat to the Balkans. Towards the end of March, Peter Fleming persuaded George Pollock, the head of SOE Cairo, to allow them to go to Yugoslavia 'to stiffen Prince Paul's resolve'. Events forced Fleming to modify the plan. Yak Mission would instead make its way to Northern Greece to train resistance groups, and Fleming managed to find room for his men and their equipment on the next troopship sailing from Alexandria. In Athens they made contact with Harold Caccia whose wife, Nancy, was the sister of Oliver Barstow, another of Fleming's guerrilla knights.

Yak Mission, 'bristling with Tommy guns and pistols', made its way north, having bought their own transport out of the war-chest. And at the end of the first week of April, on a mountainside next to the Yugoslav border, amidst breathtaking scenery, the soldier servants pitched the tents and set up the camp-beds 'as if we were on safari'. Peter Fleming could not resist sending a signal to SOE in London – AM HOLDING MONASTIR GAP. He did not know that the Adolf Hitler Leibstandarte, the SS Division commanded by Sepp Dietrich, was heading straight for the site of their glorious picnic.

• • •

John Pendlebury, the archaeologist, was always certain that the Germans would invade Greece and then his beloved Crete. He had not been idle since he had split up with Nick Hammond and the others after their flying-boat journey from Poole harbour. Based at first back at the Villa Ariadne which he knew so well from his time as curator at Knossos, and then in Heraklion, he compiled lists of pro-British and pro-Axis citizens. At that stage, before the Italian invasion and while the Metaxas government assiduously held to its neutrality, he had to act the part of 'the most bogus Vice-Consul in the world'. But Pendlebury, like the Cretans with whom he identified so strongly, despised the discretion needed for secret operations. He was far too famous for his work. The Cretans speculated about him, endlessly intrigued by this Englishman with the glass eye and swordstick who strode about their island.

Pendlebury's directness, sense of humour and joie de vivre appealed enormously to them: for a Wykehamist of that generation, he was remarkably uninhibited and he seemed to relish contradictions. Pendlebury was a convivial loner with an innocent swagger, and the war – far more anarchic than dictatorial in his case – provided the perfect opportunity to throw himself into the role of a distinctly irregular soldier with irregular weapons.

After the Italian invasion, and with British troops welcomed on Crete by the government in Athens, Pendlebury took out his cavalry captain's uniform and became liaison officer between the British forces and the Greek military authorities. His real interest, however, was the creation of a Cretan force to replace in part the locally raised division sent to the Albanian front.

Pendlebury was quick to sense a slight, and his handling of superiors was not always diplomatic. 'My best rebuke', he wrote, 'was for using the word "bastard" in a wire to a Minister. In reply I pointed out that as it was in the code book the word was obviously meant to be used, that the Minister was old enough to know the facts of life, and that it was the only word that fitted the individual it referred to.'

Official rebuffs did not deter him. At Christmas in 1940, he described the Cretans' war-like spirit: 'I have been carried shoulder high round five towns and villages and have been blessed by two bishops and have made a number of inflammatory speeches from balconies. The spirit is amazing.' And he returned from a barnstorming tour into the White Mountains and round Mount Ida, claiming 'Anglophily is rampant!' Pendlebury had a passion for maps. He prided himself that he knew 'the island better than anyone in the world' and its mountains 'stone by stone'. Given the weapons, he had not the slightest doubt that the Cretans could defeat a German invasion virtually on their own. And that invasion would come as soon as Greece fell.

• • •

Pendlebury's friend and colleague, Nick Hammond, was offered work more in line with his expertise after a month in Alexandria with the Welch Regiment and their Sunday cocktail parties. A.W. Lawrence, a professor of classical archaeology and the half-brother of Lawrence of Arabia, arrived from England, sent by Churchill to train Jews in Palestine for sabotage missions. Arnold Lawrence, Hammond and a gun-runner named Barnes established their school in a kibbutz outside Haifa. Secrecy was essential since their activities constituted a clear breach of the League of Nations Mandate. One of their first pupils was Moshe Dayan who

lost his eye training there. But the project did not prosper, mainly due to Churchill's eccentric choice of leader, for A.W. Lawrence proved to be almost as ardent an Arabist as his half-brother.

For his next appointment, Hammond had to move only a few miles down the road when, in October 1940, SOE Cairo's main training-centre for agents was set up. (This camp outside Haifa, later known as ME 102, was a place which he and most SOE officers came to know well over the next four years.) In the early spring of 1941, Hammond was summoned to Athens. He arrived there on 15 March, shortly before Peter Fleming's Yak Mission. Fleming, who lacked an explosives expert, tried to poach him, but with the Wehrmacht's Twelfth Army already in Bulgaria, Hammond felt it was far too late to start training stay-behind groups, and he was already working with the two SOE men inside the Legation. Bill Barbrook was a former regular officer recalled for service because of his Albanian experience, while his companion, Ian Pirie, had been in Greece since before the war, when he was recruited by Section D.

Pirie, an Old Harrovian once described as 'not unlike a grown-up Cupid in well-cut clothes', had a colourful business career behind him which apparently included ill-fated attempts to start a dog cemetery and then a racecourse near Athens. He evidently enjoyed life in the capital with his girl-friend Nicki Demertzi, the devastating blonde at the Argentina night-club, whom he believed to be related to the former prime minister of that name.*

Pirie's man-of-the-world act could on occasions be exasperating. One of his more famous remarks concerned the Greek royal family: 'How on earth can one take a dynasty seriously which isn't as old as one's wine merchant?' A number of Ian Pirie's undercover operations strongly suggested a compulsive levity. Apparently in all seriousness, he proposed to Harold Caccia, the First Secretary, that to boost morale in the wake of a German take-over, they should import musical lavatory-roll holders which played the Greek national anthem when the paper was pulled.

One operation, which was slightly more professional at least in theory, targeted a German wireless transmitter operated from a private apartment. It broadcast messages to Berlin at regular times, so Pirie arranged to create a sudden surge of the electric current supplied to the building, hoping this would make the circuits explode. Instead, the escapade produced an explosion of protests from other occupants, including the American Minister and a dentist who was drilling a patient's tooth at the time. The Germans merely switched to a generator and carried on.

Pirie's main mission to create a resistance network in advance was unsuccessful, although this may not have been entirely his fault. With unusual frankness, since diplomats generally preferred to remain ignorant of SOE activities, he warned Harold Caccia, a contemporary from Trinity College, Oxford, about his secret work. The Metaxas government was strongly opposed to any covert activity which might upset the Germans, so Pirie felt he could not attempt to recruit anybody associated with the regime – they would denounce him to the agents of the Minister of National Security, Maniadakis. This left only the opposition groups, mainly of the non-Communist left – strict Communist Party members still had to regard Nazi Germany as the ally of 'socialism's motherland'.*

As British military assistance to Greece increased slowly in the winter of 1940 and then greatly in the early spring of 1941, so too did the involvement of all the rival intelligence organisations. David Hunt, the archaeology don attached to the Welch Regiment in Alexandria, had arrived in Athens in November 1940, accompanied by Geoffrey Household, now in a new role of field security officer. They joined the RAF intelligence staff headed by Wing Commander Viscount Forbes, who had been Air Attaché in the Bucharest Legation at the time of Household's fruitless wait for George Young's sappers.

While Household liaised with Greek security officers, Hunt, as a staff captain in intelligence, processed the

signals intercepts, both Ultra and the lower-grade but more immediate material. Conventional military intelligence and the under-cover organisations (mainly in the form of the assistant military attachés dotted around in Balkan capitals) were seldom the best of friends. The rivalries then became further exacerbated, because General Wilson, dissatisfied with Stanley Casson of the British Military Mission, brought in Colonel Quilliam from GHQ Middle East as his own intelligence chief. When the Yugoslav army collapsed without warning in April, accusations of incompetence flew back and forth between departments with great vehemence.

4

The Double Invasion

In a vain attempt at security, the men of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force sent to Greece were not told their destination in advance. They had been issued with pith helmets, marched on to troopships, and then suffered four days of storms. 'Half the time the propellers were out of the water', they used the pith helmets as 'spew-baskets', and arrived 'sick as dogs'.

The combative optimism of those officers who rolled out maps to study invasion routes up to Austria fared little better. At the harbour of Piraeus, they found the German Military Attaché's staff on the quayside making detailed notes of their strength and equipment.* In Athens, the swastika flag flew opposite the British headquarters on the side of Mount Lycabettus. And commanding officers summoned to a briefing at the Acropole Palace Hotel heard that the whole plan of defence of the Aliakmon line had been compromised.

Yet there was little anger as units camped in the attractive hillside pinewoods ringing the north of Athens. The British and Dominion troops liked and admired the Greeks for their resistance to the Italian invasion, and in any case, CMFUs (Complete Military Fuck-Ups) were regarded as par for the course. A traditional Army fatalism took over: 'We're here, because we're here, because we're here' ran the song. Some of the Australian and New Zealand troops, on the other hand, began to wonder why they made up the majority of a doomed expeditionary force sent to honour a British obligation.

Wavell, once the disastrous misunderstanding over the Aliakmon line had come to light, had approached the Australian corps commander, Lieutenant General Thomas Blamey, and the New Zealand commander, Major General Bernard Freyberg. Although an embarrassing refusal was unlikely, Wavell and the Chiefs of Staff in London were greatly relieved when they and their prime ministers separately accepted the 'additional risks involved'. But the two Dominion governments later felt they had not been fully informed, and both Blamey and Freyberg were to be criticized for not having passed on their private doubts at the time.

Jumbo Wilson's command in Greece, known as W Force, consisted of the New Zealand Division on the right of the Aliakmon line holding the Servia Pass near Mount Olympus, the British 1st Armoured Brigade pushed forward to the north and north-east as a screen, and the 6th Australian Division on the left. At the last moment, Wavell retained the 7th Australian Division and the Polish Independent Brigade in North Africa when the strength of Rommel's attack along the coast made itself felt. This might be described as a fortunate piece of bad timing, since these formations would have made little difference to the outcome in Greece, and their absence reduced the scale of the evacuation later.

Although cold in the mountains, the days before the battle began are remembered as idyllic. The beauty of the weather, the scenery and the wild flowers left almost as deep an impression as the warmth of the welcome in the villages. One officer wrote: 'I felt more like a bridegroom than a soldier with my truck decorated with sprigs of peach blossom and my buttonhole with violets.' While British officers tried to communicate with their Greek counterparts in ancient Greek ill-remembered from the schoolroom, their soldiers, surmounting the language barrier in their own inimitable fashion, established a thriving market to

supplement rations, with empty petrol cans fetching four eggs apiece. Lamb and wine for the officers' mess were bought locally, while delicacies had to be fetched from Salonika. On Sundays, Church Parade would be held in the village church at the invitation of the priest.

On 2 April, Anthony Eden and General Sir John Dill, on their way to confer with the Yugoslav government on the border, turned up at the officers' mess of the Northumberland Hussars unannounced. Dick Hobson, the 12th Lancer brigade major who accompanied the visitors, later wrote: 'They were on the way to parley with the Yugoslavs, who were wavering as to which side to back. Mr. Eden had a special letter for the Duke [of Northumberland], then a captain in the regiment. (It transpired that this important missive was in fact his huntsman's report on the doings of the Percy Hounds!) At that time the cherry and other fruit trees on the plain had all been sprayed with copper sulphate and the trunks were all green. I remarked "I'm longing to see the blossom come out on the tops of those trees; what a sight that will be." Eden and Dill exchanged glances and said "I fear you won't be here long enough for that."'

• • •

On 25 March, Prince Paul, the Regent of Yugoslavia, had signed the Tripartite Pact in Vienna, after intense pressure from Hitler who wanted to use the Yugoslav railway system in his invasion of Greece. Two days later a coup d'état in Belgrade deposed him. Popular demonstrations of defiance followed in which a crowd insulted the German Ambassador, spitting and thumping on his car.

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