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# ***Forgotten ANZACS: the campaign in Greece, 1941***

an address<sup>1</sup> to the Institute on 29 April 2010 by

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*The ill-fated Greek campaign of April 1941 is the only occasion since the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 that an Anzac Corps has been formed. Consisting of 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division and the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, the Corps existed for only 11 Days. It conducted a delaying defence southwards down the Greek peninsula from the Yugoslavian border against superior German forces that enjoyed complete air superiority. Peter Ewer outlines the background to the Greek campaign, describes some of the Anzac Corps' major battles and details the Corps' eventual fate once withdrawal from Greece became inevitable.*

On 12 April 1941, General Thomas Blamey, Australia's commander in the Mediterranean, issued an Order of the Day announcing the formation of a new Anzac Corps. This would be only the second time in history the term 'Anzac' was used in its literal military meaning – an army corps of Australian and New Zealand divisions.

Australian and New Zealand troops were at the time fighting side by side in Greece against an invading German army, which was everywhere triumphant. With the very existence of his force in the balance, Blamey invoked the spirit of Gallipoli to inspire his troops, suggesting:

"... that the reunion of the Australian and New Zealand Divisions gives all ranks the greatest uplift. The task ahead though difficult is not nearly so desperate as that which our fathers faced in April twenty-six years ago. We go to it together with stout hearts and certainty of success."

## **Strategic Background to the Campaign**

The parallels with the original Anzacs extended beyond mere titles. Like their forefathers, the Anzacs were in Greece pursuing the strategic ambitions of Winston Churchill, who offered their services to Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey as an inducement to enter the war against Germany and thereby open a 'Balkan Front' against Hitler.

Churchill was hoping to exploit one of the great strategic blunders of the war, made by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini when he invaded Greece in October, 1940. Hoping to emulate Hitler's successes, Mussolini thought he found an easy prey in Greece. Unprovoked, he sent in his troops, only to get a profound shock – the Greek people rose as one.

Within weeks, the Italian army was in tatters, and the Greeks gave the Allied cause its first substantial victory on land in World War II, an achievement that has never received the recognition it deserves.

It was this victory that gave Churchill the opportunity to strike back at Hitler on the European mainland. By doing so, he too made a strategic mistake – failing to push home the success achieved by British and Australian forces in Libya against the Italians. With the chance to clear the Axis completely from North Africa, Churchill chose instead to halt in the Libyan desert and send the bulk of his forces to Greece.

For one thing, Churchill needed to impress American public opinion, as the 'Lend Lease' legislation, needed by Britain to secure American supplies, was then before the Congress. In this climate, Australian and New Zealand troops were rushed to Greece in March 1941, but in a remarkable failure of military-political relations, neither government in Canberra or Wellington was aware that their commanders on the ground thought the campaign was doomed from the outset. Instead, the governments of Robert Menzies in Australia and Peter Fraser in New Zealand based their agreement to participate on British assurances that tank and air cover would be provided in quantities sufficient to offer a reasonable chance of military success. It was only after the troops began arriving in Athens that the Australian War Cabinet received an appreciation from Blamey that the campaign could not be justified on military grounds.

## **The Campaign**

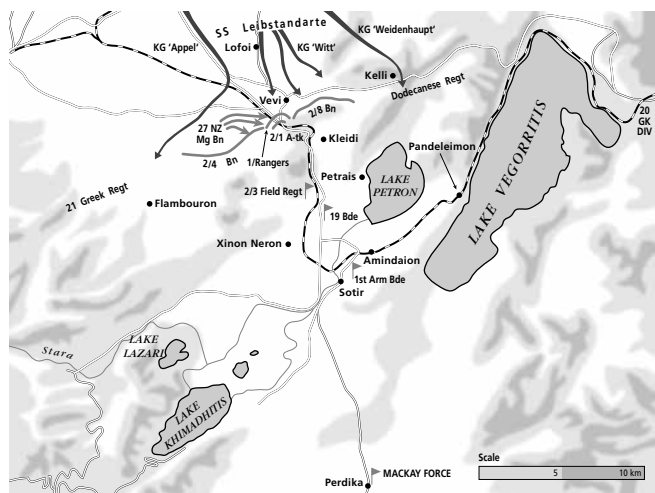
British assurances of adequate tank and air support were never met, and, indeed, the Anzacs lacked even the time to concentrate their forces on the ground before the Nazi avalanche began on 6 April 1941. Nevertheless, the Anzacs fought a number of vicious and little known battles.

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## Vevi

First, at Vevi near the Yugoslav border, Brigadier George Vasey's 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade was very nearly destroyed by Hitler's elite Leibstandarte Brigade on 12 April, the only occasion in the war when Australians would fight the Waffen-SS. Vasey had two Australian battalions under command, 2/4<sup>th</sup> and 2/8<sup>th</sup>, together with an English battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Rangers, supported by two-pound anti-tank guns from 2/1<sup>st</sup> Anti Tank Regiment, some New Zealand machine gunners, and a strong artillery contingent, including the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment (Map 1).



19<sup>th</sup> Brigade delaying position at Vevi, on the main road through central Greece just south of the Yugoslav border.

Unfortunately, this force was too small for the required front, and lacked armour support. The Australian battalions found themselves strung out over high, broken ground, on either side of a valley at the bottom of which ran the main road through central Greece. 2/4<sup>th</sup> Battalion took the left and 2/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion the right – one Australian junior commander likened the task to holding a front with a company, in country that required a full battalion. Even worse, the limited British armour in Greece was in the neighbourhood, but not under Vasey's command, and too far to the rear to intervene at the decisive moment.

When SS probing attacks began on 12 April, the Australians found it difficult to prevent infiltration, and 2/8<sup>th</sup> on the right was soon in particular difficulty. However, the battle really soured for Vasey and his men when German armour got involved from midday. In the bottom of the valley, 1<sup>st</sup> Rangers pulled back, isolating the Australian anti-tank gunners, most of whose guns had to be abandoned. The SS even got *sturmgeschutz* armoured fighting vehicles onto the high ground on the front of 2/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, a startling achievement from an Australian perspective as the Australians were accustomed to working with British tanks that lacked equivalent 'bad country' mobility. Armed only with feeble Boyes anti-tank rifles, 2/8<sup>th</sup> found it impossible to stop the German armour, and the battalion was soon in full-scale retreat over difficult mountain country, and lost many men as prisoners in the process.

Having fought German armour with infantry and limited artillery but no tanks on 12 April, Vasey's force was in bad repair the following day when the British tanks finally got involved. In effect, the pattern of the fighting was repeated on the next day, 13 April, only in the reverse, because the British tanks now fought the *panzers* with little infantry and artillery to help them. As a result, the only time British tanks opposed their German counter-parts in Greece, they were overwhelmed, and the already small British tank force was reduced to a handful of machines for the rest of the campaign.

## Platamos – Pinios Gorge

The mismanagement of the only available British armour had grave consequences just days later, when the fate of Anzac Corps hung in the balance. Faced with multiple German threats across his front, Blamey needed to get his men south, below Mount Olympus, the ancient home of the Gods which dominates central Greece. The Australian general paid greatest attention to his centre and left, and somewhat neglected his right, which rested on the Aegean Sea at a place called Platamos (Map 2, where it is shown as Platamon). There, he posted just one New Zealand unit, 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion, thinking this would be sufficient to guard the only route to the south, through a railway tunnel right on the coast. Since the tunnel could be easily dynamited to prevent a German flank manoeuvre down the coast, it was assumed that 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion could hold the line here on its own.



Anzac Corps delaying position in central Greece – Mt Olympus is just to the south-west of Platamon and Pinios Gorge is on the southern flank of Mt Olympus.

These assumptions quickly came unstuck, thanks once again to the all-terrain capability of the German armoured columns. At Platamos, the German armour was led by Lieutenant-Colonel Hermann Balck. Commanding 3 *Panzer* Regiment in Greece, Balck first made a name for himself as the leader of the *panzergrenadier* (motorised infantry) regiment that formed part of 1<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* Division in the French campaign the previous year. The fall of France is rightly remembered as a calamity for Allied arms in the Second World War, but the implication that goes with it – that the fighting was half-hearted, and the French collapsed from within – belies the reality. Balck's infantry unit was at the forefront of the *blitzkrieg* that spring – it formed the assault force that crossed the Meuse River in rubber boats to make the first decisive lodgement in the French line on 13 May 1940.

Confronted with the Platamos position, Balck was completely undeterred by the railway tunnel destroyed by Kiwi engineers, and instead on 16 April sent his tanks up and over the ridge that ran west from the sea up Mount Olympus. Again, the Anzacs lacked adequate anti-tank weapons to halt this advance, and 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion soon found itself pushed back in disarray into Pinios (Tempe) Gorge on the south flank of Mt Olympus.

Having turned Blamey's right flank, Balck was now in position to drive hard to Larissa, the township on the central Greek plain that formed a choke-point through which the whole of Anzac Corps had to pass enroute to the south and safety. If he got there, the greater part of two Anzac divisions would have been encircled and taken captive.

Balck was stopped by Brigadier 'Tubby' Allen (16<sup>th</sup> Brigade), who led an heroic stand against *panzer* attacks on his improvised defensive position at Pinios Gorge on 18 April. Moving up to support the Kiwi 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion were Allen's own 2/2<sup>nd</sup> and 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, and they got to Pinios Gorge just in time.

When Balck renewed his push on 18 April, he found the Anzacs entrenched on the south side of the Gorge. Although the Germans eventually forced Allen's men off their ground, it took Balck all day to do so, and in these vital hours the rest of Anzac Corps got through Larissa to safety.

Nowhere have Anzac troops faced longer odds than they did at Pinios Gorge, and nowhere have they faced those odds with grimmer determination than they did on 18 April 1941. To fight experienced and superbly equipped German *panzer* units with rifles and machine guns, without so much as a string of barbed wire to secure weapons pits, and with *Luftwaffe* bombers swooping overhead, all of this took a raw kind of courage, and yet the Battle of Pinios Gorge features scantily in the pantheon of Anzac legend. On that day, three Anzac battalions took their turn to be smashed into pieces by German armour. Knowing full well what

was to come, the men of these battalions stood their ground until the units of which they were a part were broken into fragments by the weight of *panzer* fire.

### ***Brállos and Thermopylae***

Still Allen achieved his goal of holding up the German encirclement long enough for the rest of Anzac Corps to make its way safely to the beaches of southern Greece for evacuation. Other similar, but less desperate, rearguard actions were fought before the Anzacs got past Athens to the evacuation beaches, especially at Brállos Pass, where a handful of Australian artillery guns commanded by Lieutenant John Anderson of 2/2<sup>nd</sup> Field Regiment held up a German column for 12 hours on 21 April, and at Thermopylae, site of the heroic Spartan stand against the Persians in 480 BC, where on 24 April, New Zealand gunners badly mauled an attempt by German tanks to 'rush' the Anzac rear.

### **The Evacuation**

Under cover of these tactically successful actions, Anzac Corps was able to extract a strategic victory of sorts, in the shape of a successful 'Anzac Dunkirk'. As at Dunkirk, the evacuation from Greece fared better than expected, and the great bulk of the troops were safely withdrawn, albeit in different circumstances. Over Dunkirk, the Royal Air Force could at least mount fighter patrols against *Luftwaffe* raids, and thousands of small fishing and pleasure craft could manage the trip across the English Channel. Over Greece, there would be no friendly fighters, and the limited shipping available had to come over much larger distances. As a result, the embarkation from Greece took place at night, from a number of widely separated points near Athens and in the Peloponnese. The 'Anzac Dunkirk' would test the discipline of the troops to the utmost, as they waited patiently to see whether friendly ships or the Germans would arrive first.

To their great credit as soldiers, that discipline did hold, but even once aboard ship and heading south, the danger had not passed. On 27 April, more than 2,500 troops from a variety of units were crammed aboard the troopship, *Costa Rica*. Singled out by German dive-bombers, she escaped a direct hit, but one near miss split the ship's steel plates abreast the engine room. Jack Burke of the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Field Ambulance Company was one of the young Australians aboard. Down below, he was preparing a meal of sausages from a tin long coveted during the evacuation. He vowed and declared, "I'm going to get those bloody sausages", and maintained his defiance until the ship's lights went out and all the internal spaces were plunged into utter darkness. Burke relented – "bugger the sausages, I got out."

As water poured in through the fractured hull of the *Costa Rica*, her captain concluded she would founder within the hour. Fortunately, the boilers held, and destroyers were brought alongside to take off the

longsuffering Anzacs. As they nosed up to the stricken troopship, those being rescued faced a challenging and dangerous feat of acrobatics to regain safety. A large swell was running, and to jump from sinking deck to rolling destroyer required good timing – and gumption. Jack Burke judged his departure from the *Costa Rica* perfectly, but found his hobnail boots gave an excellent impersonation of ice skates when he hit the deck of the destroyer below. Careering across the fo'castle, Burke's further passage was arrested by the rope rail guarding the far side of the ship, but his tin hat felt no compulsion to halt, and over the side it went. Reminiscing, Burke considered his contribution to maritime archaeology – “there's a rusty old tin hat in the Mediterranean somewhere.”

### Conclusion

Burke was among 50,662 soldiers successfully brought back from Greece. For the Australians, the cost of opposing Hitler's designs on the home of democracy was high – 320 lay dead in Greek graves, another 494 were wounded and 2,030 began four long years as prisoners.

The fighting on mainland Greece was over for the Anzac Corps, and such a formation has never been seen since. For the troops, the evacuation was over, but another vicious battle, to defend Crete, lay in wait. But that, as they say, is another story.

### Reference

Ewer, Peter (2008). *Forgotten ANZACS: the campaign in Greece 1941* (Scribe Publications: Carlton North, Victoria) 432 pp.

**The Author:** Dr Peter Ewer, a senior manager with the Department of Justice, Victoria, has a passion for military history and studies it in his spare time. He completed a first-class honours degree in politics at Macquarie University in 1983 and a doctorate in technology and culture at RMIT University in 2005. He is the author of *Forgotten ANZACS: the campaign in Greece 1941* (Ewer 2008) on which this address was based, and also of *Wounded Eagle: the bombing of Darwin and Australia's air defence scandal* (New Holland Publishing, 2009). [Photo of Dr Ewer: the author]