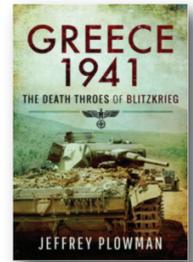


BOOK REVIEW:

Greece 1941: the death throes of Blitzkrieg

by Jeffrey Plowman

Pen & Sword Military: Barnsley, South Yorkshire; 2018; 226 pp.; ISBN 9781526730251; RRP \$52.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 587 PLOW 2018



The British Prime Minister at the time, Winston Churchill, referred to the dispatch of British and Dominion forces to defend Greece against Nazi invasion as “a great risk in a good cause”. With *Greece 1941: The Death Throes of Blitzkrieg*, Jeffrey Plowman has revisited the campaign, a chaotic fighting retreat that has confused historians and confounded authors for almost eight decades, and he provides a new and fascinating perspective.

When we picked up the book, we were expecting a German-centric account of the campaign as the dust jacket has a photograph of an apparently knocked out Panzer, the *Reichsadler* symbol and the term Blitzkrieg in the subtitle. The content, however, is more heavily weighted to accounts by British, Australian and New Zealand veterans.

In the introduction, Plowman provides a useful summary of the origins of the term Blitzkrieg. The chapters then follow a well-trodden narrative of the campaign, from the politics inspired by the strategic location of Greece, to a description of the battles and breaches of the doomed defensive lines from the mountains in the north to the evacuation beaches on the south coast.

The text of the narrative is drawn largely from secondary-source accounts of veterans and official histories from Australia, New Zealand and Britain. Plowman does not provide as many German references as the title would suggest, however, from our research, we are well aware of just how scarce are German descriptions and reflections on the contacts. Those he is able to access, he uses well and it is through them that we receive his new perspectives. At the tactical level, he integrates the German accounts with those of the Australian and New Zealand forces they were fighting very well, at times explaining outcomes that previously had seemed counter-intuitive.

Despite the sub-title, Plowman does not explain convincingly why the Greek campaign might be considered “the death throes of Blitzkrieg”. He attempts to do so in Chapter 11, saying that the invasion of Yugoslavia was an example of the blitzkrieg doctrine, but it broke down in Greece (p. 162). It is true as he says that the Greeks and their British allies mounted a more formidable defence than the disunited Yugoslavs did. Nevertheless, the Germans still managed to conquer Greece in three weeks, by outmanoeuvring the Greeks and British – they outflanked their well-defended blocking positions on the main axes of advance to Athens, forcing the British to conduct a delaying defence

back to their eventual withdrawal beaches. While tactically, the German armour and mechanised infantry struggled at times, in particular against the New Zealand infantry in the mountainous terrain of the Servia and Olympus Passes, Blitzkrieg could never have been expected to work in the mountains of Greece as it had on the plains of Europe.

That said, Plowman does a good job of placing the Greek campaign in its strategic context and then of covering the action in detail at both the campaign and tactical levels. The book contains seven maps which assist the reader to follow and understand the narrative at the campaign level, but these maps are no help at the strategic or tactical levels. This is a particular issue at the tactical level as the actions at places such as Klieidi Pass (Vevi), Aliákmon River, Servia Pass, Olympus Pass, Pineios Gorge, and the Thermopylae Line, are described very well, but the detail is hard to follow in the absence of maps illustrating the tactical situation.

Plowman includes 20 pages of rather eclectic but nevertheless fascinating appendices that range from the potted biographies of the opposing commanders at brigade and divisional level to a table laying out the location of each of the evacuations with the units lifted and the British and Allied vessels involved. The appendix that is missing is a comparison of the relative sizes of the German units. Although the glossary provides a comparison between British Army, German Army and *Waffen SS* ranks, Plowman’s use of German unit terminology can challenge readers who do not know whether the German unit named is the equivalent of a British infantry company, battalion, brigade or division.

Greece 1941 also requires a good edit. Typographical errors occur every few pages and, although they do not necessarily interrupt the narrative, they are an irritation. Officers’ names are misspelt – different spellings even occur within the same paragraph; and dates are muddled, causing the reader to wonder whether an event described in the narrative as occurring say on 9 April, while the rest of the paragraph is telling the story of a battle that occurred on 19 April, is a flashback or just a typographic error.

In summary, despite its limitations, *Greece 1941* is a significant contribution to the historiography of a campaign that cost the Australian Imperial Force its first combat division of the Second World War and will prove a valuable addition to the library of any student of this vital part of the war in the Mediterranean.

Brad Manera and David Leece