



Monday, Dec. 16, 1940

BALKAN THEATRE: Surprise No. 6

(See Cover)

The Greeks poured on. Pushing northward to Porto Edda, they crossed the marshes above Lake Butrinto which the Italians had thought were impassable. They waded armpit-deep through icy water, pushing their guns on rafts. They crawled over the mountains from the east, cut the road to Delvino and planted their guns on the heights above Porto Edda. The Italians set the town afire and retired up the coast road, leaving to the Greeks a destroyer (damaged by British bombs) which had taken refuge in the harbor.

Fifteen miles over the hills, the Greeks had taken all the heights surrounding Argirocastro. There the Italians also fired the town and fled up the road toward Tepeleni—harassed by snipers and artillery from the hills above. Before the Italian rear guard of tanks retired, the Greek infantry stormed the town. They dropped from balconies on to the roofs of tanks, threw hand grenades into the openings, jammed the tank-tread mechanisms with their bayonets.

In Athens people danced in the street by moonlight, carrying at the head of their procession the victory flag that had been flown on the Parthenon. First Corizza, then Porto Edda, then Argirocastro—the three advance Italian bases in Albania—now side by side over all three flew the double eagle of Albania and the blue and white banner of Greece. The Greeks rejoiced and the world was stunned.

War is always full of surprises, and afterwards the explanation of how they occurred gradually leaks out to the outside world. The first surprise of World War II was the German conquest of Poland in 27 days—explained by the inferior Polish materiel and the rashness of the High Command and the German development of Blitzkrieg tactics with tanks and planes. The second was the swift German conquest of Norway—explained by fifth-column activity and the elaborately daring German plan of invasion. The third was the German sweep through the Low Countries and France, an elaboration of Blitzkrieg tactics with Panzer divisions, planes, parachute troops, deception, fifth columny all used with symphonic mastery.

Even before the third surprise was complete, the fourth surprise had taken place. A British Army of 400,000 men, all but surrounded in Flanders, succeeded in effecting its escape by sea from Dunkirk—explained by dogged British courage, the reckless brilliance of British seamanship, and the ability of the Royal Air Force to maintain local command of the air. The fifth surprise took place no one knew exactly when—when Hitler found his forces unable to undertake a direct assault last summer on Britain herself. The explanation has never been completely given, but it included as its chief ingredients the ability of the R. A. F. to inflict devastating punishment on German daylight bombers and to upset German preparations for invasion across the Channel.

But none of these surprises was greater than Surprise No. 6: the ability of ill-armed Greeks to fight off and defeat the well-armed and more numerous Italians.

The methods and the tactics which made this possible were last week becoming apparent. They could be summed up in one military moral: the Greek Army knew how to use what it had. For example, it is said that one bomb tipped the scale at Corizza. Knowing that Italian reserves were being rushed along a certain road, a Greek general sent for some of the few British Blenheims available to him. They arrived in time, knocked out a bridge over which the Italians must pass, machine-gunned the halted column on the far side. Only one of the three Blenheims returned from that foray but the trick was turned.

Little John & the Parrot. Up from Athens last week to assay the situation and decide whether his troops should dig in for the winter pretty soon or try to strike on through, drive the Italians into the Mediterranean before they could poise a counterblow, went the long-nosed, aristocratic Commander in Chief who taught and led the Greek Army: General Alexander Papagos (paa-paa-gos). Every morning, for two hours at Army Headquarters in Athens, he had conferred intently with Premier General "Little John" Metaxas. His enemies derided General Papagos as "Little John's" Papagei (parrot), overlooking the fact that the relationship between the two men is much like the Foch-Weygand relation: master and disciple.

Dumpy, round-faced Little John, now 69, learned his soldiering in Germany; lean, bat-eared Alexander, 57, learned his at France's Ecole Supérieure de Guerre. Both suffered the pangs of Greece's sorry war with Turkey in 1922. Out of that defeat came their resolution to do better another time. Often the loser in one war wins the next (witness France after 1870, Germany after 1918). As Chief of Staff, General Papagos saw to it that Greece's 18-month compulsory training for all males between 21 and 50 was no child's play. King George II, after his restoration in 1935 by a military junta of which Papagos was a member, made the Army popular by insisting on clean barracks. But it was the combined, concentrated brains of Metaxas and Papagos which evolved the mountain strategy and tactics now bearing such startling fruit. Last week Norwegian mountain troops journeyed from Great Britain to get in on the Greek show, and the Swiss applied for permission to come and take notes.

Meticulous is the word for General Papagos. In private life a patrician to his long fingertips, a foppish lover of fine horses and a patron of racing, his lifelong study has been a huge collection of military books. John Metaxas' name went upon the defense system thrown up along the Bulgarian and Yugoslav borders, which were later extended hastily down the Albanian. But in General Papagos' head rests knowledge of every gully and goat track not only in the Greek mountains but far beyond. Like his soldiers, whom amazed correspondents found toiling without lanterns at midnight to repair bridges, he can thread the

Balkans blindfolded.

On occasion he works out each move, for platoons as well as divisions, in minutest detail before ordering it.

Fascist propagandists have insisted that their Greek debacle was caused by the perfidy of Albania and Albion, by "bad luck" (early rains) and by Greek treachery in being all mobilized and ready in numbers far greater than Italy could get to the front.* The last part of this lame story is obviously untrue, but it may be that behind the beard of many an "Albanian" who incited his comrades' surrender or rebellion grinned the sly face of a British Intelligence operative. But the fact remains that Italy threw into the fight, at the outset, ten full divisions numbering, with supply and labor troops, over 200,000 men, to which two more divisions were added after the going got rough. These included many celeri (mobile) units. At the Pindus passes the invaders were confronted by not more than eight divisions out of the 13, plus one of cavalry, which Greece could mobilize but of which she could equip only ten for fighting. Not even numbers of airplanes made much difference, for Italian planes outnumbered the Greeks (even after the British based squadrons at Larissa, Athens) by at least 500 to 100, new planes versus old. And in artillery the Fascist advantage was estimated at 919 guns to less than 100.

Thermopylae in Reverse. 2,420 years ago, 1,400 Spartans, Thebans and Thespians, occupying a narrow mountain pass above the sea, were surprised from the rear by a large Persian detachment clambering around through the hills. Spartan King Leonidas and his men fought stubbornly for several hours, but all (except the Thebans, who surrendered) were annihilated. The Spartans at Thermopylae were great heroes but they lost the battle.

General Papagos' tactics of 1940 are basically the Persian tactics at Thermopylae and his troops too have repeatedly taken the long, hard way around through the mountains to attack the Italians from behind and above.

With their mechanized equipment, their heavier and more numerous artillery and their larger number of troops, the Italians naturally stuck to the roads, and the roads run through the valleys and the passes. General Papagos made use of the mountains by moving along the heights to outflank the Italians. His infantry, composed of mountaineers — all Greece is mountainous — knew exactly how to get through hills. Everything fitted.

Even the Greek shortage of artillery, particularly heavy guns, was turned to advantage. They dragged their light mountain pieces over rough trails and got into position where they could drop shells on Italians who could not see them. The effectiveness of these tactics was immense. Proud of their artillery, the Greeks thought it was an immense good omen when Përmet fell on the feast day of Saint Barbara, patroness of artillerymen.*

Only of simple equipment — rifles, hand grenades, bayonets — did the Greeks have reasonably adequate supplies, and of these they made the best. Military experts agree that the bayonet and hand-to-hand fighting are out-of-date in modern war, but the Greeks found use for them. Advancing through the mountains, they repeatedly stormed small positions held by Italian detachments who had been sent out to safeguard the flanks of columns on the roads below. Time and again, Greek bayonet and grenade proved conclusive.

The Finnlike toughness of the Greek soldiers was a final factor in what happened. The Italian peasant is not accustomed to a life of luxury, but Greek mountaineers live on even less. They ordinarily subsist on a little cheese, a few olives, goat's milk, a swallow of resinous wine, black bread and a few leeks. To them the hardship of mountain campaigning, far from field kitchens and services of supply, is hardly more than an inconvenience. The evzones or elite guards (who wear khaki kilts in battle, not their white dress fustanella and red pomponned slippers) are chosen for stature, and of them there are five regiments. The rest of the troops are wiry little men, averaging less than 5 ft. 5 in. Observers marveled at their endurance on long night marches up blizzardy mountains, through slushy defiles; their sleeping on cold rocks or in frozen ditches; their unflinching grins and cheery chatter before, during and after battles. In every way the poverty of Greece had given it strength and the Greek Command knew how to capitalize upon it.

The Course of Battle. With the fall of Porto Edda the Italians were left with only three ports to bring troops and supplies into Albania:

>> Valona, a windy harbor with two wharves with shallow draft.

>> Durazzo, a shallow harbor full of shoals, with one good pier.

>> San Giovanni di Medua, a primitive harbor, where ships anchor to a sunken hull.

Between them there is a connecting coast road, but the roads to the battleground (see map p. 29) lead diagonally into the interior with hardly a passable crossroad, so the Italian column operating in each valley is practically isolated from every other column and dependent on one sole route for supply. Greek supplies come up the other end of these roads, but they have some intercommunication via the lateral Corizza-Ioannina road.

Furthermore the Greeks, advancing on the mountain ridges, were in a position to attack the Italian lines of communications broadside on. The extreme Italian left, after yielding Pogradec and retreating up the west shore of Lake Ochrida, was in a particularly awkward position. Greek mules and shock troops pressed simultaneously along the Mokrë Mountain ridge and down the Devoll River Valley to try to cut those lines near Elbasan. Should they succeed, the Italian Ninth Army of the north would be in danger of encirclement, annihilation.

If this took place, the Greeks might be able to drive into the coastal plain. Whether it would profit them to do so will depend on whether the British can lend effective air support to prevent strong Italian reinforcements from being landed.

Whether the Italians will be able to form a strong defense line before they are pushed entirely out of the mountains remains to be seen. Even if they are not able to do so General Papagos may find it wiser to halt his advance on the edge of the higher mountains. In that region he would not lay his armies open to

Italian mechanized attack; he might be able to cut the pipeline on which Italy depends for Albanian oil; he would also have strong defensive positions in the mountains; and his army would not be too far extended if the Germans come to the Italians' aid by marching down through Yugoslavia and Monastir to attack his rear.

Scapegoat elected for Mussolini's Albanian fiasco was white-haired, crinkle-eyed Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Chief of the General Staff, universally recognized as Italy's sagest soldier. He had opposed the Greek venture. Germany's Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel is also said to have opposed the Pindus push, recommended instead a sudden naval encirclement with multiple landing parties, such as Germany sprang on Norway. Being obliged to cons jit Keitel last month, to be told how to retrieve his subordinates' botch of a campaign which he never approved, must have made the 68-year-old Marshal swallow hard. Last week he retired "at his own request" from the service of a Duce whom he once offered to crush as an upstart.

Shoved in to replace Badoglio was Genera Ugo Cavallero, 60, a seasoned soldier, now double-chinned and pince-nezed, whom Mussolini trusted in 1925-28 as Under Secretary of War (Benito was Minister) and builder-upper of the modern Italian Army; again in 1938-39 as Army chief (under the Duke of Aosta) in Ethiopia. General Cavallero's acceptability to the Germans is high. He has had time out from his military career to make a success of running war industries (rubber, planes, steel). Lately he has been chief liaison man with the German General Staff. His promotion and the official fanfare that went with it did not, however, drown out much angry comment by well-beloved old Badoglio's adherents.

Next to go was General ("of the Army for War Merit") Cesare Maria de' Vecchi, Conte di Val Cismon, 56, mighty-mustached Governor of the Dodecanese Islands. One of the original Fascist quad-rumvir— of the 1922 March on Rome, De' Vecchi has even been mentioned as successor to II Duce, but he rated as an administrator rather than a soldier. In his stead, Mussolini appointed lean, hard-boiled General Ettore Bastico, 64, a veteran of the 1911 war with Turkey in which the islands were acquired, veteran also of World War I, Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War, in which his "volunteers" captured Santander. Cut off from home by the British blockade out of Crete, General Bastico's new berth will not be cushy.

Third to the chopping block was Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, Chief of Staff and Under Secretary of the Navy. If Albania was bad, what has happened to the Italian Fleet is horrible — whittled down in each & every encounter it has had with the British. To replace Cavagnari, Mussolini chose Admiral Arturo Riccardi, with Admiral Angelo Jacchino taking the new post of Commander of the Fleet at Sea.

Meanwhile, not only had Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Turkey been emboldened (with sardonic Russia's encouragement, too) to stand off the Axis, but the war itself, the Germans' war, was increasingly unpopular in Italy. Last week's war budget of 14,000,000,000 lire with 700,000,000 additional for home relief, is not an immense sum in real money (total: \$735,000,000). But it is a lot to a poor country where a soldier's wife gets only 1.20 lire (five cents) per day allowance and bread costs 1.50 lire a pound. General Papagos and the Greeks had not yet won a war, but they had put Mussolini in a difficult spot.

* Greek last week produced photostats of orders allegedly takes from Italian officers, announcing the offensive into Greece on Oct. 26. two days before hostilities were declared.

* Barbara, a beauteous Middle East virgin of the Third Century, was kept in a tower by her stern, heathen father, one Dioscorus. Be fore leaving on a journey, he ordered a bath house for her, with two windows. In his absence, she got the architect to make it three windows. When her father returned, she confessed the three windows were for the Trinity: she had become a Christian. Dioscorus had her tortured, sentenced to die, himself beheaded her. On his way home from court he was struck by lightning, burned to death. Thereafter people, especially gunners and miners, called on Barbara during thunderstorms, fires, explosions.

* The others: the late Italo Balbo and Michele Bianchi, and white-bearded Marshal Emilio De Bono.

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