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World War: BALKAN THEATER: Too Many of Them

It took Germany exactly three weeks to conquer Yugoslavia and Greece. To most of Britain, Australia and the U.S., that seemed a matter for profound gloom. But although the campaign had been lost, there were indications that after details of the Battle of Greece became known, the Greek campaign might possibly go down in history as one of the most brilliant tactical operations of British Empire arms. Although Hitler's men have not yet been stopped, this battle showed that if ever Britons confront Germans on anything like equal terms, Britain stands a good chance of winning.

The British and Greeks were beaten on the third day of fighting—with the Yugoslav collapse in the Vardar Valley. From the information so far available, it appears that from then on less than three full divisions of British-Anzacs troops and perhaps five divisions of Greeks (perhaps ten Greek divisions were facing the Italians on the Albanian front) bore the brunt of the best attack that could be mounted by 40 divisions of Germans. Under these conditions the Allies had virtually no reserves except a British tank division which backstopped the line wherever it weakened. The British and Anzacs held the anchor position on the right wing at the Aegean coast where the best road and the only railroad led south to Athens. Time & again they were outflanked on the land side and forced to retire from threatened positions.

There are few more difficult military operations than fighting a rearguard action against an aggressive enemy; under the strain most armies collapse. But the British, Australians and New Zealanders fought for 18 days and 245 miles—from Salonika to Olympus to Larissa to Thermopylae to Thebes to Athens—and not once did they allow the Germans to break through their lines in any force.

This was not another Dunkirk. At Dunkirk a British Army which had been ingloriously outmaneuvered and beaten without pitched battle, escaped after abandoning its tanks, its artillery, its ammunition dumps, even its rifles.

This was not another Narvik. There the British were not outnumbered. They just arrived too late, and never established a fighting front.

In Greece there was, for the first time, a test of ready British against ready Germans, and though the odds were 4-to-1 against the British, the outcome could not be called a disaster. The British had proved themselves.

But wars are not won with return tickets. The British will not win World War II by squeezing miniature forces into defensive crannies at the last moment, and withdrawing them brilliantly. Some sardonic wit in London last week figured out what B.E.F. meant: Back Every Fortnight. There was just enough truth in this interpretation to point up the real significance of the Battle of Greece. Britons can fight, but they will not be able to make an expeditionary force stick until some way, somehow, they get enough men, enough planes and enough tanks to approximate Nazi strength.

The Flight of Kings, the tragic symbol of imminent collapse, came last week when two monarchs, Peter of Yugoslavia and George of Greece, hobbled far away from their thrones. Each uttered as he fled the anguished formulas of determination—echoes of words spoken in varying degrees of clarity by other monarchs in other defeats, by Haakon, Leopold, Wilhelmina, Boris, Carol.

Peter had fled by air to Athens. There he composed his declaration—his was the only true authority, etc., etc.—and tried to broadcast it to the world. The week's most pathetic irony was that Peter's words failed to get by the Greek censor—for reasons still unknown. Then Peter boarded another plane and set out for Palestine. On the way the plane was attacked by an Axis fighter, and one of Peter's Ministers was killed. But the hurt plane reached Jerusalem, a new cradle for Free Yugoslavia.

George's flight was by steamer, from the crowded, bomb-tangled port of Peirae-us. As he left, he released his heroic, echoing formula: ". . . hard destinies of war . . . lawful Government . . . continue the fight . . . resistance to the end. . . ." Then, by night, the steamer picked its way to Suda Bay, Crete, and King George, his brother and his Ministers proceeded to Candia, where the monarch called the first Cabinet meeting of Free Greece.

Retreat from Glory. On the Western Front the defeat was hard for the Greeks to take. There for five months they had held in check the huge but inept Italian machine. But last week the Germans cut across and looped in behind the Greek force—through the Pindus Mountains, to Yanina. The Greeks, in a pocket, had no choice but to surrender.

Here came one of the strangest curiosities of World War II. On Monday, April 21, Greek General Tsolakoglou capitulated to the Germans. But either the Germans did not tell the Italians, or Mussolini, anxious to win his own capitulation, did not tell his people. So Mussolini, who had vowed "to crush the kidneys" of the Greeks, went right on hurling his soldiers against the stubborn Greek wall, until he had lost 6,000 men. On Wednesday, April 23, when the Greek situation was clearly hopeless, General Tsolakoglou finally surrendered to the Italians.

Again Thermopylae. Last week the British acknowledged the spectacular fighting which had been done by Australians and New Zealanders in Greece by

appointing as second in command in the entire Middle East the Australian commander, Lieut. General Sir Thomas Blarney. On the day of this honor, Sir Thomas' men were in a tight spot. They had carried out a magnificent withdrawal across the plains of Thessaly.

During the retreat, the R.A.F. had done its level and dive-bombing best. One pilot, who had flown a total of 120 hours, said: "There are too many of them. We do not have the aircraft and they are destroying our airfields. The troops at the front are running out of ammunition and we can't stop the Hun by dive-bombing roads. . . . Three of our aircraft set off loaded with bombs from which the detonators had been removed in order to drop them for our sappers so they would have demolition explosives. But the planes were shot down before they could do their work." Outnumbered numerically by at least 8-to-1, the R.A.F. planes in the end were further hampered by the necessity of falling back on Crete's airfields, so far away that most fighters had only 40 minutes' fuel over the battlefields.

The troops, who had been fighting day & night for two weeks straight, tumbled into ditches as the Nazi strafers made at them, then scrambled up to pot the advancing tanks or bayonet their way out of traps. As the forces fell back toward wedge-shaped Attica, it became evident that the bulk of them could get clear only if the rearguard made a magnificent stand. Sir Thomas decided that historic Thermopylae pass was the spot. He ordered the chosen few: "Every man must now do his job with strong determination. Select positions with care, and so prevent the enemy from coming down on you from above or infiltrating along mountain tracks. . . . I call on every Anzac to grit his teeth, and be worthy of his father."

In 480 B.C., when the 1,000 Spartans and Thespians of King Leonidas held out for hours until every one had been butchered by the 10,000 Persians, the pass of Thermopylae, which lies not between two mountains but between a mountain ridge and the sea, was only 42 feet wide. Since then the delta of the River Spercheus has built out almost three miles of marshy land, widening the pass. Also, the main road to Athens no longer runs between the bluff and the sea. Instead, just before it reaches the old pass, it climbs steeply over the mountain ridge, following a small valley. But Thermopylae is still a fine defensive position.

Last week, for three days, a small force of Australians, New Zealanders and Britons dug themselves in on the heights above the pass's little mill and aqueduct, near its hot springs, and poured down fire so that the Germans could neither scale the heights nor move along the narrow strip of shore. One of the earliest fifth columnists, a Greek from Malis, betrayed the Spartans by leading the Persians through a mountain path around to the rear of the Greeks. Last week the Germans finally took Thermopylae by the same operation, but, like the pass, on a much wider scale, a swing far to the west of Mt. Parnassus.

Thermopylae was the key to the week's action. By the admission of the Germans' modest and honest communiqués, British-Anzac resistance at the pass held up the Nazi advance—which did not succeed in taking the heights by assault—for many hours: hours enough to turn the evacuation of the main British force from a slaughter to an almost orderly retirement.

Blarney's Mob. Like most Australians, Tom Blarney is a weatherbeaten, hearty fellow. He was born on a farm at Wagga Wagga, N.S.W. He did the outdoor things—hunting, shooting, riding, hockey, soccer, rugby, lacrosse—until he was all gristle. He joined the Army, fought Turkey, emerged as Chief of Staff of the A.I.F., then retired to versatile successes, as a police commissioner, businessman, radio commentator. One month before World War II broke out he bought a little seaside home, got married and prepared to go off into the wilds for a honeymoon. He never went. He was called up to command the entire Australian Infantry Force.

Australians call the second A.I.F. "Blarney's Mob." Tom Blarney says he doesn't mind; he's "proud to be associated with such a mob." As the mob marched through the streets of Athens last week, the Athenians stood by cheering and throwing flowers and weeping. The General and his men could have asked no deeper tribute.

Not many hours later German motorcyclists, then truck troops, then tank crews coasted unopposed into the city. The swastika, trade-mark of totalitarianism, was planted on the Acropolis. But now the streets were sullen, the shutters drawn, the last buoyancy of resistance silenced. The Battle of the Balkans was over.

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