



Monday, Nov. 25, 1940

## BALKAN THEATRE: First Round: Hellas

A one-eyed man in riding boots and breeches and a dark whipcord tunic looked down on the sparkling sea from a huge plane. He had finished reading his dispatches. The steward came along the cabin balancing a tray. "Tea, sir?" The man declined it. Then with a pleasant sigh the man leaned back in his seat, opened a book of Browning's poems, and lost himself.

The poetry reader was General Sir Archibald Percival Wavell, Commander in Chief of Britain's Middle East Forces, on his way to Crete to inspect new British establishments there. At Suda Bay he heard reports from the expeditionary officers and toured gun emplacements. One of the huge guns was fired, and Cretans who stood around cheered and clapped as if an Italian ship had been sunk before their eyes. They talked exultingly of Suda Bay as "an eastern Gibraltar." Sir Archibald heard with satisfaction of the raid on Taranto (see p. 20), of R. A. F. cooperation in Greece, of the wonderful work of the Greeks themselves.

That the man responsible for one of the most crucial theatres of war should have passed tense hours reading poetry was altogether fitting. He was flying to help the Greeks, and poetry was being made in Hellas. Theirs was a battle which wanted Homer, a cause which heeded Byron: Better to sink beneath the shock Than moulder piecemeal on the rock.

Dead Romans. High in Metsovo Pass, embracing the mud, a young Italian lay with his head and chest crumpled by machine-gun fire. No Italian had charged farther than he into Greece. Spread-eagled behind him were more of the dead. They wore green jerkins, they had mountains of kit on their backs, they all lay on their fronts in blood, all kissed the earth. One dead Roman had his arms around a tree. Young boys lay with their pants still creased. Tin hats were crushed and the heads under them. Farther down, materiel, the proud stuff of conquest, lay around—trucks disguised with a sweet artistry of cypress leaves, trailers burned out and pushed aside, wrecked tanks which had spewed out their metal guts.

The dead were in little groups. They had been well dispersed. In the forests farther down they lay sprawled on leaves, and around them like more leaves lay intimate papers and pictures of relatives.

And all around them in the mud were footprints—Greek footprints.

Still farther down unshaven, red-faced Greeks marched toward the invaders with fixed bayonets. Near them trudged their women, erect with food and even ammunition balanced on their heads; and their mules, diamond-hitched with heavy loads. Much farther along, the front-line toilers did their work.

Out in front the Greeks attacked all week. Italian dispatches said that stories of Greek victories were dirty British propaganda—but Italian communiqués, if they said anything about the war, said: "Greek attacks were repulsed. . . ." An invasion is not made up of defenders' attacks.

The war was being fought, and its first phase was now won, straight out of antique textbooks. The Greeks found in these first weeks of the war that the newfangled trappings of war were traps for those who used them in this terrain. The Greeks reverted to an old tactic: with bayonet and grenade they stormed heights from which their fire drove the enemy out of valleys below. With this tactic they pushed the enemy back on the central Pindus front. With necessary modifications of this tactic they pushed the enemy back of the Kalamas River on the flat coastal front. Devout Greeks, remembering that Italians had invaded Albania on Good Friday and sunk the cruiser *Helle* on the day of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, saw Providence in the Kalamas River's first flood in 128 years. Using the same device they pressed their counterinvasion of Albania on the northern end of the front. Corizza (see map, p. 21) was on the point of falling as the week began, was still about to fall as it ended. The reason for the delay was simple: Corizza lies in the centre of a bowl of mountains. The Greeks could not rush down into the dish until they had patiently stormed the entire rim, or else the Italians would do to them just what they had been doing to the Italians. This week Athenian reports claimed Corizza partly won.

"I will never turn back." The first round had clearly gone to the bantamweight. Now it was up to the heavyweight to move in again. Whether the second round would be another story was anyone's guess, but that the Italians intended to try was certain. At Innsbruck Italian and German Commanders in Chief Pietro Badoglio and Wilhelm Keitel met and talked strategy. It must have been an embarrassment to both these old soldiers to consider that if the Italians could not knock over the Greeks by themselves, the Germans might have to come in through Yugoslavia. This week Italians sent wave after wave of planes to strafe Greek positions everywhere, and concentrated tanks near the Yugoslav extremity of the border.

Having led with his chin, Benito Mussolini stuck it farther out than ever this week and defiantly broadcast to the world: "Greece is a tricky enemy. . . . Their hate is profound and incurable. . . ."

"With absolute certainty I tell you we will break Greece's back. Whether in two months or twelve months, it little matters.

. . . Whatever happens, I will never turn back."

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