

## Veterans' stories of the British campaign in Greece (1941)

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*At the beginning of 1941 Britain decided to provide military aid to Greece, which was facing an ongoing war against Italy and was expecting a German invasion. This article discusses the impressions and experiences of the British soldiers who took part in the campaign, using their letters, diaries and their – mostly unpublished – reminiscences. It examines their perception of Greece and its inhabitants, as well of their fellow allies and their enemies; their venture in military operations, or captivity; and their daily routine. Furthermore, it comments on their retrospective assessments of the campaign.*

**Keywords:** British soldiers; letters, diaries, memoirs; Greek history

### Introduction

At the beginning of 1941 Germany and her allies dominated continental Europe and Britain remained isolated. Apart from the Battle of Britain, the only victory that British forces had won was outside Europe, in North Africa against the Italians. The repulsion of the Italian offensive against Greece in the previous autumn was the only defeat the Axis forces had suffered on the continent until that time. Thus, Germany's decision to aid its ally and invade Greece forced London to send a small expeditionary force to the country, which, however, was unable to check the enemy advance and was soon forced to retreat. The decision to provide Greece with military aid, despite Britain's shortages and weaknesses at the time, as well as the conduct of the campaign, were criticized and disputed both during the war and afterwards. This subject has preoccupied both British and Greek and, to a lesser extent, German historians, though it has by no means been treated exhaustively. In the last two decades new studies have succeeded in shedding light on unknown aspects of the campaign by drawing on new sources.

The emphasis, however, continues to be laid on its political, diplomatic and operational dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

This article will attempt to approach the British campaign in Greece<sup>2</sup> by focusing on the impressions and experiences of the British soldiers who took part in it. More specifically, it will attempt to provide a brief description of their perception of Greece and its inhabitants, their fellow Allied combatants and their enemies, the military operations, the experience of captivity and everyday life. It will also attempt to record and comment on the conclusions they reached regarding the campaign.

The study is based both on contemporary and on later testimonies of campaign veterans that are held in the Private Papers Archives at the Imperial War Museum in London. They consist of 15 personal testimonies: four letters written by soldiers to their loved ones (written between May 1941 and January 1942), two diaries and nine memoirs, generally unpublished, written during the period 1960–2000. Their data have been cross-checked against the memoirs of other veterans and a selection of the most important historical works on this particular subject.

The authors of these sources were all British males of military age and they all survived the Second World War. At the time of the expedition five of them were non-commissioned officers and privates, three junior officers, four senior officers and three general officers. Six of them served in combat units, eight as auxiliary troops – i.e. in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), the Corps of Royal Engineers and the RAF's ground crew – and one in the administration as a General Staff officer. This means that they were not all involved in the military operations to the same extent and that they did not all have the same overview of events. Six of them, of various ranks and units, were captured in the final phase of the expedition and spent the rest of the war as prisoners of war, usually in Germany. Their social background varies as well: though most of them appear to come from middle-class families, there are also a few of working-class origin.

The letters, diaries and memoirs represent exciting primary sources for historians, because through their subjective nature and narrative style they provide useful information about their authors' experiences, relationships, emotions and motives, about the

1 See, indicatively, G. Long, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, II: Greece, Crete and Syria* (Canberra 1953); F. L. W. Wood, *The New Zealand People at War: Political and External Affairs* (Wellington 1958); R. Higham, *Diary of a Disaster: British Aid to Greece, 1940-1941* (Lexington 1986); A. Zapantis, *Hitler's Balkan Campaign and the Invasion of the USSR* (New York 1987); A. Beevor, *Crete. The Battle and the Resistance* (London 1991); S. Lawlor, *Churchill and the Politics of War, 1940-1941* (Cambridge 1994); G. E. Blau, *Invasion Balkans! The German Campaign in the Balkans, Spring 1941* (Shippensburg 1997); H. Richter, *Η ιταλο-γερμανική επίθεση εναντίον της Ελλάδας*, trans. K. Sarropoulos (Athens 1998); M. Willingham, *Perilous Commitments. The Battle for Greece and Crete, 1940-1941* (Staplehurst 2005); P. Ewer, *Forgotten ANZACS: the Campaign in Greece, 1941* (Carlton North, Vic. 2008); C. Stockings and E. Hancock, *Swastika over the Acropolis: Re-interpreting the Nazi Invasion of Greece in World War II* (Leiden and Boston 2013).

2 It does not include the experience of the Battle of Crete, which constitutes a special chapter in the history of WWII in the Mediterranean.

way in which they perceived events, people and things. Despite their subjectivity, their language use is often influenced by formal or public discourse.<sup>3</sup> The motives of the creators of such sources may vary, depending on the genre, the author, and the conditions under which they are written. Soldiers in particular write letters or keep diaries in order to keep in touch with their loved ones, to express their feelings, to relate their experiences, to avoid oblivion, to boost their morale, or even to confirm their personal identity in an alien environment. The desire to express oneself and achieve self-awareness can also motivate veterans to write reminiscences. Reminiscences, however, differ from letters and diaries because of their retrospective character, which allows the author to compose events and to place them in an order that did not exist at the time he/she experienced them. Thus, a soldier's decision to write his reminiscences may respond to his need to make sense of his wartime experiences and to justify wartime actions, to create 'memorial gestures that fix and communicate public meaning, like war monuments',<sup>4</sup> or to provide an answer to other relevant publicized material.<sup>5</sup>

### The Greek campaign: political dilemmas and military realities

The Greek campaign of spring 1941 was the result of a series of military but primarily political and diplomatic dilemmas faced by Britain in this phase of the war. Mussolini's failure to defeat Greece gave Britain the opportunity to create a new front against the Axis in continental Europe and to strike against Italian positions in the Mediterranean. At the same time, however, it created additional obligations and commitments at a moment when the Battle of Britain was not yet over and, furthermore, the British forces in Egypt were confronted with the Italian invasion.<sup>6</sup>

The possibility of an Italian collapse in Albania, a British military presence in Greece, the consequent threat of British air attacks on the Romanian oilfields and the need to secure Germany's southern Mediterranean flank for the eventual invasion of the Soviet Union led to Hitler's decision to invade Greece (Operation Marita). The British government learned of the Germans' plans in early January 1941 and decided 'to do everything possible [...] to send at once to Greece the fullest support within our power'.<sup>7</sup>

3 I. Paperno, 'What can be done with diaries?', *Russian Review* 63.4 (2004) 561–5; M. Dobson, 'Letters', in M. Dobson and B. Ziemann (eds), *Reading Primary Sources. The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London 2009) 57, 64, 69; Ch. Hämmerle, 'Diaries', *op. cit.*, 146–55; and D. Carlson, 'Autobiography', *op. cit.*, 189.

4 S. Hynes, 'Personal narratives and commemoration', in J. Winter and E. Sivan (eds), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge 1999) 205.

5 J. Peneff, 'Myths in life stories', in R. Samuel and P. Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York 1987) 38; A. Thomson, 'Memory as a battlefield: personal and political investments in the national military past', *Oral History Review* 22.2 (1995) 65; Paperno, 'What can be done', 562–3; J. Hellbeck, "'The diaries of Fritzes and the letters of Gretchens": personal writings from the German-Soviet War and their readers', *Kritiko: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10.3 (2009) 575–6.

6 Lawlor, *Churchill*, 176–256, and Higham, *Diary*, 26.

7 W. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance: The Second World War* (New York 2002, 1st ed. 1948) 14.

Such assistance, it was believed, would determine the attitude of Turkey and influence both the US (in view of the extension of aid to Britain through the ratification of The Lend-Lease Act) and the USSR. Yet the decision was critical from the military point of view, since any possible assistance could come only from the forces of the Middle East, whose limited resources were overstretched by extensive commitments. At the same time, it was most probable that a small expeditionary force in Greece could not match a massive German offensive and would be compelled to withdraw once again (after Norway and Dunkirk), provoking unnecessary casualties. Indeed, both the Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Command, General Archibald Percival Wavell, and the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand, Robert Menzies and Peter Fraser, were reluctant to support an expedition to Greece, though in the end the political factors prevailed over the military realities. Nor was the Greek dictator Ioannis Metaxas impressed by the British offer in January 1941 of three divisions, but after his death at the end of the month, the pro-British King George II was persuaded to accept a British expeditionary force.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Operation Lustre began: between 6 March and 3 April about 62,000 men and their equipment were moved to Greece. These comprised the British 1st Armoured Brigade, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 6th Australian Division, the so-called 'Lustre force' or 'W' Force, named after their commander, Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson. Lieutenant General Sir Bernard Freyberg was appointed commander of the New Zealand division and Lieutenant General Thomas Blamey commander of the Australian one. Due to shortages in shipping, these forces arrived in Greece in a piecemeal fashion, some of them too late to do anything but withdraw.<sup>9</sup>

The Germans launched their simultaneous attack against Greece and Yugoslavia on 6 April. Soon, the German army marched unhindered through Yugoslavia and the Vardar valley, occupying Thessaloniki on April 9 and forcing the Greek Second Army in Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace to capitulate unconditionally. On the next day SS and Panzer groups advanced in the western part of Greek Macedonia, and after being briefly stopped at the Kleidi Pass near the town of Florina, they broke through, compelling British, Dominion and Greek troops to retreat. During the next few days the 'W' Force withdrew southwards to Thermopylae in order to create a new defensive line. Yet when the exhausted and encircled Greek Army in Albania surrendered to the Germans on 20 April, Wilson ordered a general withdrawal. British and Dominion units retreated towards the harbours of Attica and the Peloponnese, where most of them (about 50,000 soldiers) were evacuated by the Royal Navy. Estimates of total British and Dominion casualties vary according to the sources, and are not usually precise: 10,000-14,000, largely base and auxiliary troops, became prisoners of war, and between 1,000 and 2,500 were listed as killed or missing. The losses in heavy

8 Beevor, *Crete*, 14-16, and Richter, *Η ιταλο-γερμανική*, 231-4, 317-43.

9 Richter, *Η ιταλο-γερμανική*, 346-7, 431; Lawlor, *Churchill*, 168, and Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 25.

equipment, artillery and transport were much heavier and caused serious problems for Wavell and his ongoing commitments in Libya and Crete. The Germans suffered about 5,000 casualties (killed and wounded). The Greek and Italian losses were much greater, since they include the total number of victims since the beginning of the conflict in October 1940 (around 15,000 and 38,000 dead or missing respectively).<sup>10</sup>

## Veterans' testimonies

### *The Place*

The veterans' testimonies refer extensively to the nature and scenery of Greece, the ancient monuments, the towns, the inhabitants and their customs, recalling earlier accounts by British travellers in the Balkans. These references are more detailed in the memoirs than they are in the letters and particularly the diaries. The British soldiers seem to have been particularly impressed by Greece's mountain landscapes, which for them was a novel spectacle compared with what they had seen either back home or in Egypt, where they had previously served. It is worth noting that these accounts are in complete contrast to those we find in the reminiscences of the veterans of the Salonika Campaign in the First World War, which generally presented a negative picture of the region's topography and described the climate as 'poisonous' (because of mosquitos and malaria).<sup>11</sup> This is probably an indication of the different conditions encountered in the same country by the British soldiers in the two wars, as well as the difference between the static war on the Salonika Front and the Blitzkrieg retreat in the 1941 campaign. 'The country here was very beautiful with high, snow-covered mountain ranges [...] and all the spring flowers were just coming out', Major R. R. C. Boileau of the British Rangers commented in a letter.<sup>12</sup> Brigadier Parrington in his diary noted the difference between the 'wonderful air' of Greece and the 'enervating climate of Egypt'.<sup>13</sup> Other testimonies, however, mention the 'bitterly cold weather' and the 'hard, solid, vertical, cold rain' that the British soldiers encountered in the mountainous and northern areas of the country, noting that 'we were living in luxury' compared to their poorly dressed Greek counterparts.<sup>14</sup> The Australians and New Zealanders, on the other hand,

10 Richter, *Η ιταλο-γερμανική*, 468-595; Willingham, *Perilous Commitments*, 76-96; Beevor, *Crete*, 30-42, 54. On the Allies' losses see Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 504, 516.

11 H. Lake, *In Salonica with our Army* (London 1917) 15, 128. See also G. W. Price, *The Story of the Salonica Army* (New York 1918) 4, 269.

12 [Imperial] W[ar] M[useum, London]/P[ri]vate P[apers]/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, 6 May 1941.

13 IWM/PP/Doc. 7311: L. Parrington: Diary, 8 March 1941. See also IWM/PP/Doc. 438: H. W. Beatty Hayley, *A Wartime Interlude. An Account of his Participation in the Second World War, August 1939-April 1946* (Keele 1994) 50.

14 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, May 1941 (last letter); IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: W. G. (Rocky) Rockall, 'ZETO ΕΛΛΑΣ. A Greek Tragedy', unpublished typescript, 1990, 5; IWM/PP/Doc. 7933: C. M. L. Clements: *Campaign-Greece 1941*, unpublished memoirs, n.d. (1960s).

seemed to have suffered worse from the weather.<sup>15</sup> Another characteristic feature of the testimonies is the different way in which they describe Greek rural houses compared with the testimonies from the First World War: in the First World War they are described as ‘poor, mean structures with never a hint or trace of beauty or security about them’,<sup>16</sup> while in the Second they are presented as ‘more spotlessly clean than the average cottage in England’.<sup>17</sup> The soldiers’ impressions in the 1941 campaign may have been different to those in the Great War, but the traces of that war were still visible in the landscape: some of the soldiers who reached Macedonia could still see the scenes of the battles waged in the Salonika Campaign and discover objects left by the Allied soldiers in the old trenches.<sup>18</sup> The descriptions of the towns are very brief and, apart from the references to historical monuments, coffee-houses and clubs, they usually present the destruction caused by enemy bombing.<sup>19</sup>

The references to ancient monuments are also limited. Here too we find comparisons with Egypt, as the ‘monstrous’ dimensions of the Egyptian pyramids are contrasted with the simplicity of the Acropolis, which is regarded as being ‘so much more cultured and different’ – an indication, perhaps, of the classical education of the individuals who made such observations.<sup>20</sup> Also, most of the testimonies make positive comments about the local cuisine, although some show less enthusiasm for the local drinks, ‘all pretty nasty and mostly very intoxicating such as Retsina, Greek brandy and Mastikha’.<sup>21</sup>

### *Allies, friends and enemies*

‘W’ Force consisted of a variety of nationalities, not just British, Australians and New Zealanders but also Palestinians and Cypriots who were working as sappers, labourers and mule drivers. During the campaign British soldiers also encountered Greek soldiers as well as civilians, and a mixture of soldiers and refugees of different nationalities. As for ‘W’ Force itself, the comments of the British soldiers are usually positive and stress the bravery and high morale of the men. More rarely, a few of them express complaints about the unruly behaviour of Australian and New Zealander soldiers, repeating traditional British stereotypes. In at least two of his letters Boileau makes derogatory remarks about the Australians. Indeed, in one of them he claims that his men ‘have twice the guts

15 Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 203.

16 Lake, *In Salonica*, 12.

17 IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.

18 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, May 1941 (last letter).

19 IWM/PP/Doc. 438: Beatty Hayley, *A Wartime Interlude*, 50, 51, 53; IWM/PP/Doc. 14872: B. West: *War Memoirs, 1939-1946*, unpublished, n.d.; IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: Rockall, ‘ZETO ΕΛΛΑΣ’, 7-8.

20 IWM/PP/Doc. 438: Beatty Hayley: Handwritten memoirs in the form of a journal, 6 April 1941. See also IWM/PP/Doc. 5961: G. MacLean: Unpublished memoirs, n.d.

21 IWM/PP/Doc. 7311: L. Parrington: Diary, 8 March 1941. See also IWM/PP/Doc. 13664: C. Hamersma: Selection of unpublished reminiscences and stories, and IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: W. G. Rockall: Rockall, *ZETO ΕΛΛΑΣ*, 5.

of the N.Zs and 500 times the guts of an Aussie'.<sup>22</sup> His comment may well have to do with the debate over whether it was the Rangers or the Australians of the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade that retreated prematurely from the battle at Kleidi Pass, thus exposing the Allied defence – according to some Australian and New Zealander sources, it was the British Rangers who were to blame.<sup>23</sup>

There are more frequent references to Greek soldiers. Here the spirit of camaraderie and respect in the common struggle against the Axis forces co-exists with a feeling of pity for the sufferings the Greek soldiers faced and for their poor and inadequate equipment. Boileau, who was very strict with Dominion soldiers, commented that the Greek 'is a brave fighter, but cannot, even by an infant of two, be expected to stand up against modern air attack, tanks etc. when armed with a somewhat ancient rifle'.<sup>24</sup> Major R. A. Barnett provides a highly dramatic picture of his Greek comrades-in-arms during a retreat in a letter to his mother:

they seemed to have lost all their heart and morale and were continuously drifting away in twos and threes. [...] Added to that they had to carry out a long withdrawal with no mechanical transport and they were dog tired.<sup>25</sup>

Other British testimonies paint similar pictures, though they do not express derogatory comments about the Greek soldiers – yet another way in which these testimonies differ from those given in the Great War.<sup>26</sup> The testimonies generally display a cordial attitude towards the civilian population, no doubt in response to the warm reception and hospitality the latter gave to the British and Dominion troops. The expressions of admiration and gratitude are often accompanied by a feeling of shame at abandoning the country to the mercy of the enemy.<sup>27</sup> Barnett wrote that the ardent farewell given to the Allied troops by the people of Athens 'was pathetic and brought tears to our eyes', while staff officer Arthur Guy Salisbury-Jones declared later that 'throughout those days I was haunted by the thought that, after their valiant stand against Italians and Germans alike, we were leaving them in the lurch'.<sup>28</sup>

The references to the enemy – German and Italian soldiers – are rarer, although the testimonies of quite a few British soldiers that arrived in Greece before 6 April speak of

22 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letters, 6, 7 and 8 May 1941.

23 M. Hill, *Diggers and Greeks. The Australian Campaign in Greece and Crete* (Sydney 2010) 89; Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 142, 268-9; and Ewer, *Forgotten ANZACS*, 121, 129, 139.

24 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, May 1941. For the meagre equipment of the Greek Army see Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 540.

25 IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.

26 IWM/PP/Doc.5961: G. MacLean; IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: Rockall, 'ZETO ΕΛΛΑΣ', 3-4.

27 IWM/PP/Doc. 13214: Sir Claude Pelly: Letter to his wife Peg, 3-4 May 1941; IWM/PP/Doc.5961: G. MacLean; IWM/PP/Doc. 9797: G. M. O. Davy: G. Davy, *Within the Fringe*, unpublished memoirs, n.d.; IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: W. G. Rockall: Rockall, *ZETO ΕΛΛΑΣ*, 2. Similar references to the civilian population are also made by Australian soldiers: see Hill, *Diggers*, 128-9, 132-9.

28 IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942; IWM/PP/Doc. 14641: Sir Guy Salisbury: unpublished memoirs, n.d.

the provocative behaviour of German spies and the observation of the Allied landings by the German military attaché in Athens.<sup>29</sup> Some of the authors of the sources acknowledge the battle-worthiness and good training of the German troops, particularly the vanguard units, although the subject most frequently mentioned is the rumours about the supposed ‘fifth-columnists’, or German paratroopers who were alleged to be carrying out attacks disguised in Greek and Australian army uniforms. The rumours are mentioned in other English-language sources but have not been confirmed.<sup>30</sup> The Italians rarely appear in the British soldiers’ accounts but when they do it is either as Greek prisoners of war (‘W’ Force did not engage any Italian forces), or in the aerial combats that took place in the skies over Greece, where they are usually described in derogatory language.<sup>31</sup>

### *Military operations*

In the veterans’ testimonies the campaign in Greece is largely presented as a constant retreat. Many of the veterans never managed to reach their original destinations, while a considerable number of them landed in Greece when preparations for the evacuation of the Allied troops had already begun.<sup>32</sup> Barnett commented that it was ‘hateful having to start the campaign by withdrawing like that without firing a shot, especially as it meant not only leaving to its fate the countryside that had befriended us and housed us for the past three weeks’.<sup>33</sup> Also, the veterans’ testimonies reveal a certain difficulty in accurately reconstructing the details of the operations, a weakness that is evident in similar works of military history. It was natural that the authors of the sources that were compiled at the time the events took place (letters and diaries) should not have had a full or clear picture of the situation. The memoirs that appeared later, on the other hand, often follow the narrative adopted in the official Allied histories of the campaign or serve as responses to these histories in order to refute conclusions believed to damage the authors’ personal or national prestige.<sup>34</sup> The accounts of battles are usually confined to the hostilities between German vanguards and Allied rearguards. An example of this is the battle that took place at Kleidi Pass, where the German Panzer attack was initially dealt with successfully by the Allied anti-tank guns and artillery.<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that the testimonies refer almost exclusively to clashes between British, Dominion and

29 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, May 1941 (last letter); IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942; IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: Rockall, ‘ZETO ΕΛΛΑΣ’, 16.

30 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: *ibid.*; IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: *ibid.*; IWM/PP/Doc. 438: Beatty Hayley: Handwritten memoirs, 15 April 1941; IWM/PP/Doc. 13664: C. Hamersma. Cf. Hill, *Diggers*, 86; Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 284, 289, 349, 364.

31 IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: Rockall, ‘ZETO ΕΛΛΑΣ’, 10, 13-4.

32 IWM/PP/Doc. 7933: C. M. L. Clements; IWM/PP/Doc. 438: Beatty Hayley, *A Wartime Interlude*, 52-5.

33 IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.

34 On this subject see Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 12, 528.

35 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, 6 May 1941. Cf. Beevor, *Crete*, 36-7, and Ewer, *Forgotten ANZACS*, 106-40.



German troops, despite the fact that in the same area (Pisoderi) the clashes between Greek and German troops were just as fierce, if not fiercer. In this respect, the testimonies (even the contemporary ones) largely adopt the narrative followed by the later literature in English. In both cases, cultural stereotypes and a sense of cultural and racial superiority on the part of 'W' Force commanders, combined with the poor judgements of the technologically less-developed Greek Army undermined the Greek contribution to the campaign.<sup>36</sup> The language barrier probably contributed to such interpretations. In any case we know that, together with the absence of proper information and of good maps, it hampered effective Greek-'W' Force cooperation.<sup>37</sup>

It is no accident, then, that the testimonies focus their accounts of the military operations mainly on the difficulties of troop movements due to the poor road network, the mountainous terrain, the bad weather, the retreat of soldiers and civilians along the same roads and the Luftwaffe raids.<sup>38</sup> Hayley later painted a bleak picture of the retreat over Mount Bralos:

By this time the road was chock-a-block with lorries, guns, Bren-carriers and just about every imaginable vehicle. No lights were allowed and everyone was anxious not to be caught by the advancing enemy [...] Greek lorries, old tractors and ancient buses caused us a lot of bother for they neither knew nor cared about military convoy procedures, and no doubt they were pretty demoralized.<sup>39</sup>

The constant fear of enemy air raids and the lack of RAF support are evident in the British veterans' works. Although the bad weather conditions that prevailed during the German offensive did not permit the Luftwaffe to play an active role in the hostilities, the air raids hampered the Allied retreat and terrified the British and Dominion troops. The lack of RAF support was bemoaned by all the campaign veterans. New Zealander soldiers would comment sarcastically that the RAF's initials stood for 'Rare As Fairies'.<sup>40</sup> The sight of any type of British aircraft was enough to momentarily boost their spirits, though they would soon realize that that was all they were going to see. For some the anti-aircraft cover was a farce: W. G. Rockall, who was serving in the ground crew of RAF, said that 'it became a standing joke that if Jerry didn't get us the Bofors would'.<sup>41</sup> Comments on the Greek air force were equally sarcastic: 'the Greeks had a few high wing PZL1 monoplane aircraft which were as ancient as the hills around us'.<sup>42</sup>

36 Richter, *Η ιταλο-γερμανική*, 489-92; Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 515-19.

37 IWM/PP/Doc. 7933: C. M. L. Clements; IWM/PP/Doc. 7311: L. Parrington: Diary, 15 March 1941; IWM/PP/Doc. 438: Beatty Hayley, *A Wartime Interlude*, 56. Cf. Beevor, *Crete*, 19-20, 31.

38 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, 6 May 1941; IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.

39 IWM/PP/Doc. 438: Beatty Hayley, *A Wartime Interlude*, 58.

40 Beevor, *Crete*, 38.

41 IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: Rockall, 'ΖΕΤΟ ΕΛΛΑΣ', 16-7.

42 *Ibid.*, 4. See also IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942, and IWM/PP/Doc. 5961: G. MacLean.

*Evacuation*

The evacuation of the Allied troops from Greece is a major theme in the veterans' testimonies. They all stress the dramatic, often chaotic, conditions in which it took place. According to the plan drawn up by the commanders of 'W' Force, the evacuation operation (Operation Demon) was to be carried out between 24 and 29 April through ports in eastern and western Attica and the Peloponnese.<sup>43</sup> The troops that made their way to Attica almost all managed to be evacuated without any serious problems. However, the agony felt by those who were left behind waiting for the next boat was acute: 'It was a terrible moment, the most awful of my life I think', Boileau notes in one of his letters.<sup>44</sup> In the Peloponnese things turned out worse: the German air force was now bombarding the retreating army on a daily basis, while on 26 April German paratroopers captured the Corinth Canal. In Nafplio the bombing and the sinking of the passenger ship 'Ulster Prince' spread panic and temporarily closed the harbour. Later the available ships left overloaded, carrying 5,000 instead of 3,000 soldiers.<sup>45</sup> Although about 4,000 New Zealanders managed to leave Monemvasia without any problems, at Kalamata some 7,000-9,000 men were left behind, together with their commander, Brigadier Leonard Parrington, who was forced to surrender two days later.<sup>46</sup> The confusion that exists over the number of those who were evacuated and the number of those who were taken prisoner at Kalamata is due partly to the chaotic conditions and partly to the fact that among the troops of 'W' Force, there was an indeterminate number of refugees, mainly Yugoslav soldiers – who, according to Parrington, numbered about 2,500.<sup>47</sup>

The surrender of such a large number of men (about two thirds of the Allies' total losses in the campaign) caused great discontent in the aftermath of the campaign and continued to be debated after the war, with many of the protagonists in the drama, including Wilson and Freyberg, laying the blame on Parrington, on the grounds that he had not made proper preparations for his defence. Brigadier George Davy, one of those who oversaw Operation Demon, called his surrender 'a disgrace'.<sup>48</sup> In his unpublished memoirs, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Marcus Lefevre Clements also makes implicit criticisms of Parrington's handling of the situation, although his own stance in the repulsion of the German forces has also been criticized. On his part, Parrington claims in his diary that, knowing that no more ships would arrive that day, and with the Germans already outside Kalamata, he decided that further resistance was futile. The affair was

43 IWM/PP/Doc. 7311: L. Parrington: Diary, 21 and 24 April 1941. Cf. Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 458-60.

44 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, 6 May 1941. See also IWM/PP/Doc.5961: G. MacLean, and IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.

45 IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: Rockall, 'ZETO ΕΛΛΑΣ', 26; IWM/PP/Doc. 438: Beatty Hayley: Handwritten memoirs, 25 April 1941. For the German air raids during the evacuation see also Beevor, *Crete*, 50-4.

46 Ewer, *Forgotten ANZACS*, 278-80; Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 491.

47 IWM/PP/Doc. 7311: L. Parrington: Diary, 24-29 April 1941; cf. Willingham, *Perilous Commitments*, 95-6; Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 491 ff.

48 IWM/PP/Doc. 9797: G. M. O. Davy.

investigated after the war by a British military court of enquiry, which decided not to proceed with further investigations.<sup>49</sup> It is indeed difficult to imagine how the British brigadier could have dealt with the German advance successfully until the evacuation operation was completed – if, that is, British ships had continued to arrive – given that the number of combat-worthy troops he had at his disposal was limited and their morale low. Overall, however, the evacuation of 'W' Force from Greece was a successful operation, which was by no means a minor achievement in the circumstances. Aside from seaborne evacuations, the RAF also managed to fly around 940 passengers out of Greece. The ground engineer Rockall, who escaped in a sea-plane, mentions the case of a Sunderland aircraft 'that had so many on board that it couldn't get off the water and more or less taxied all the way to Alexandria'.<sup>50</sup>

### *Captivity*

Parrington's notes in his diary are terse and come to an end on the day of the surrender. Parrington speaks of the soldiers' exhaustion, the collapse of morale and discipline, which was intensified by the confusion, the rumours that were rife and the presence of thousands of 'restless' Yugoslav soldiers who were accompanied by their wives and children.<sup>51</sup> Similar scenes are portrayed by both Clements and MacLean. Clements tried to escape but was arrested at Antikythera. MacLean also mentions the Palestinian (Arabs and Jews) and Cypriot sappers and labourers who accompanied the troops of 'W' Force, a disproportionately large percentage of whom were taken prisoner, as it appears they were not a priority in the evacuation procedure. According to Gavin Long, the official historian of the Australian army, 3,806 of the 4,670 labourers were captured during the campaign.<sup>52</sup> Obviously, the Jewish labourers were in a tragic position. MacLean mentions a member of the Jewish Company who, with tears running down his face, said to him: 'You don't know, but they'll take us all up to the hills and shoot the lot of us, I'm a Jew I know'.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, quite a few Cypriots managed to escape captivity because of the language they spoke, or escaped after being taken prisoner by pretending to be Greeks.<sup>54</sup>

MacLean and the other prisoners who had been caught in the Peloponnese, together with others who had been taken captive in Attica, such as the military doctor Cyril Hamersma, were initially interned in a prisoner-of-war camp in the city of Corinth. There, apart from Britons, Australians and New Zealanders, it was possible to find Indians, Sikhs, Cypriots, Jews, Arabs, Yugoslavs, a number of soldiers in the service

49 IWM/PP/Doc. 7933: C. M. L. Clements; IWM/PP/Doc. 7311: L. Parrington: Diary, 29 April 1941. Cf. Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 496, 501-3.

50 IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: Rockall, 'ΖΕΤΟ ΕΛΛΑΣ', 29. Cf. Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 504.

51 IWM/PP/Doc. 7311: L. Parrington: Diary, 29 April 1941.

52 Long, *Greece, Crete*, 181, 183.

53 IWM/PP/Doc. 7933: C. M. L. Clements; IWM/PP/Doc.5961: G. MacLean.

54 P. Παπαπολιβίου, *Αναζητώντας την ελευθερία. Ένας Κύπριος στρατιώτης του βρετανικού στρατού στην κατοχική Θεσσαλονίκη και Χαλκιδική 1941-1942* (Thessaloniki 2009) 62-4.

of the Albanian King Zog, Maoris, Fijians and even German and Italian deserters. The camp conditions are described as pitiful and the food meagre. By the end of the third week 75% of the men were suffering from various illnesses, mainly dysentery, and the first death had occurred. After a visit by the Swedish Red Cross and also by Himmler himself, the conditions partly improved. A great deal of help was provided by the local Greek inhabitants, often of course with a view to profit, despite the German prohibitions:

They were first class people, the best you could get anywhere, they were not averse to dodging machine guns to fling stuff over the wire to us and this kind of thing was common place, and happened every day in one place or another, everybody saw this.<sup>55</sup>

The German guards are generally presented as being hard on the prisoners and particularly cruel to the Jews, whom they would beat and humiliate. Hamersma feared that he might be picked on because of his black curly hair.<sup>56</sup> Six weeks after their arrival in Corinth, the prisoners were ordered to begin marching on foot towards Athens and from there they continued to Thessaloniki (some on various kinds of transport and others on foot). MacLean says that along the entire way they were offered currants, cigarettes and food by men, women and children, despite the threats or warning shots of the German soldiers.<sup>57</sup> In Thessaloniki they were installed in the Pavlos Melas prisoner-of-war camp, where the conditions were 'utterly filthy', which led to an unknown number of prisoners dying of exhaustion and illness.<sup>58</sup> From there, from late July onwards, they gradually began to be transferred to various Stalags in Germany. Hamersma later recalled the scene of their departure:

From the old Turkish barracks in Salonica we were lined up, faint with hunger, a few possessions under our arms, then counted and pushed into some sort of column to begin our march through the streets of Salonica past the curious Greek people who lined the pavements, silently watching our ignominious departure. There were a few tears and handkerchiefs held by the black-shawled women, but the men with caps pulled well down over their dark fear-filled eyes hung sheepishly in the background. What a contrast to our triumphant entry into Athens in troop-laden lorries [...] a few months previously.<sup>59</sup>

A remarkably large number of soldiers from 'W' Force managed to escape after the complete occupation of Greece by the Axis forces, some of them even after they had been

55 IWM/PP/Doc.5961: G. MacLean.

56 IWM/PP/Doc. 13664: C. Hamersma.

57 IWM/PP/Doc.5961: G. MacLean, and IWM/PP/Doc.10848: Major Alexis T. Casdagli.

58 Ch. Rollings, *Prisoner of War. Voices Behind the Wire in the Second World War* (Reading 2007) 61–62, 296–7.

59 IWM/PP/Doc. 13664: C. Hamersma.

transferred to prisoner-of-war camps. According to some British estimates, some 1,400 men managed to secretly get out of Greece by December 1941. Many others were concealed by local people and escaped later with the help of the Resistance, or remained in hiding until the end of the Nazi occupation in the autumn of 1944.<sup>60</sup>

### *Soldiers' daily routine and leisure time*

The nature of the Greek campaign and the way in which it developed left little scope for the soldiers to have leisure time and a fixed daily routine, as happened on other, static fronts. The campaign lasted less than two months, during which time British and Dominion troops had to disembark at Piraeus, move quickly to Greece's northern borders, confront the enemy's assault, and then retreat even more rapidly south again in order to be evacuated. Thus their time was taken up by troop movements, hostilities, assembling and disassembling equipment, the repair or destruction of military materiel, taking care of the wounded and sick. It is no accident, then, that little mention is made in the veterans' testimonies of leisure-time activities. Few of the men – and even then, rarely – had the opportunity to visit, for example, the Acropolis and Athens' other ancient monuments, or to stroll around the city's streets. One who did was Hamersma who, whenever his duties permitted, would explore the city, making 'sketches continuously at every possible opportunity'.<sup>61</sup> More frequent mention is made of visits to coffee-shops, patisseries and tavernas, where the British soldiers consumed local dishes and drinks, which they were very often treated to by the locals. Rockall relates how sometimes, after endless shifts at the airfields, he would visit tavernas and coffee-shops, making merry with fellow soldiers and Greeks. Indeed, he mentions a visit he made to a cinema in Larissa where he had heard an English film was playing: 'English film?! Have you ever seen "Ceiling Zero" with James Cagney speaking French, with Greek subtitles on the bottom of the screen? It was hilarious'.<sup>62</sup> During the withdrawal phase, of course, there were no opportunities at all for such relaxation. Barnett noted that their only form of amusement was consuming as many of their supplies as possible so that they would not fall into the hands of the Germans.<sup>63</sup>

### *Veterans' self-reflections*

As we have seen, Allied commanders sent British and Dominion troops to Greece in the knowledge that they would not be sufficient to stop the German operation and that they

60 IWM/PP/Doc. 10843: E. Carracher, Letter to his uncle and aunt, Mr and Mrs W. G. Sergeant, 25 June 1941. Carracher refers to his numerous escapes from the Germans both in Greece and in Crete. Cf. Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 505. For an account of the imprisonment and escape of a New Zealander from Pavlos Melas camp see W. B. 'Sandy' Thomas, *Dare to Be Free* (London 1953).

61 IWM/PP/Doc. 13664: C. Hamersma. Hamersma continued to paint during his captivity and after the war, until his death in 1994, see his 'Now I can tell it in sketches and words', accessed May 15, 2017, <http://hamersma-uk.blogspot.gr/>.

62 IWM/PP/Doc. 7626: Rockall, 'ΖΕΤΟ ΕΛΛΑΣ', 8 and 9-13.

63 IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.

would soon be forced to retreat. The soldiers themselves, of course, were not aware of this. Many months after the end of the campaign Barnett wrote in a letter that:

In the light of what happened and with the knowledge one now has since the Russian campaign of the enormous forces which Germany had available to put against us, it was a ridiculously inadequate force. But I don't remember thinking so at that time, we were full of confidence – so much so that we took to Greece with us everything we possessed [...] so that we should have some smart clothes to wear in Berlin!<sup>64</sup>

The same ignorance is borne out in Hayley's memoirs, in which he states that, 'I took it for granted that we would repulse a German attack on the northern boundary of Greece'.<sup>65</sup> It was natural, therefore, that the reality of the situation should have dismayed the British soldiers, who once again were forced to evacuate an Allied country under the pressure of a German advance. In a letter to his wife in early May 1941 the then Squadron Leader and later Air Chief Marshal Sir Claude Pelly ended by criticizing the British strategy:

It took one's mind off the dreadful tragedy of the Greek affair. We let them in for this thing (not us out here – the Home experts). Metaxas, had he lived, would never have allowed us to send a totally inadequate army into Greece, and just play into German hands. We've spoiled the successful little war that the Greeks were having, messed up in their country and had another gallant evacuation, losing every piece of material we put in the country, and risking Egypt into the bargain.<sup>66</sup>

This criticism is repeated in the veterans' later memoirs. In the view of Private Ben West, troops should never have been sent to Greece: 'it may have shortened the Greek war and they wouldn't have had the casualties on both sides, the Greeks and ourselves'.<sup>67</sup> Similar opinions were also expressed after the war by other protagonists in the campaign and historians, particularly Australian.<sup>68</sup>

Although the defeat was yet another disappointment for Britain, it led neither to a drop in the soldiers' morale nor to unrest on the Home Front. In London, the House of Commons gave a vote of confidence to the government on its policy in Greece and Churchill left the Chamber to an ovation.<sup>69</sup> Many of the soldiers who had campaigned in Greece shared the same sense of confidence, despite the bitterness of the evacuation. Boileau noted that: 'Beaches, for some time, will fail to have much attraction for me, the

64 IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.

65 IWM/PP/Doc. 438: Beatty Hayley, *A Wartime Interlude*, 70.

66 IWM/PP/Doc. 13214: Sir Claude Pelly: Letter, 3-4 May 1941.

67 IWM/PP/Doc. 14872: B. West.

68 Wood, *Political and External*, 202.

69 House of Commons Debates, vol. 371 cc. 867-950, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1941/may/07/war-situation>. Cf. Richter, *Η ιταλο-γερμανική*, 637.

word has an ominous ring about it, but I look forward later to smacking the Boche on more even terms and getting our own back [...] The time will come'.<sup>70</sup>

At the same time we can see that – even in that period – it was believed by some that the Greek campaign should be viewed within the context of the general developments of the war, and so its contribution should not be underestimated. Barnett, for example, recognized that the bitterness he had originally felt at the outcome of the Battle of Greece had softened and that, viewing events with the benefit of hindsight a short while later, he concluded that if Britain had not come to Greece's aid, the Germans would not have delayed their campaign in Russia. 'And if that had happened "General Janvier and General Fevrier" would not be the great generals they are today'.<sup>71</sup> The view that Operation Marita had fatally delayed Operation Barbarossa was adopted by Churchill and other British politicians and military officials in as early as September 1941 and Barnett's letter shows that this view was widely held. This interpretation could justify their decisions and actions, and, on the other hand, could also provide the German military leadership with excuses for the failure of Barbarossa, as later assessments by German officials – and, indeed, by Hitler himself – show. However, since the end of the war this interpretation has been questioned: recent historical research has shown that the reasons for the delay in the Russian campaign and the overall failure of the operation were much more complex.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusions

In many respects the British soldiers' testimonies of the Greek campaign in 1941 are reminiscent of earlier travelogues by British travellers or veterans of the Salonika Front: the descriptions of the landscape and the climate, the ethnographical observations, the references to ancient monuments and the view of Greece as a land of the 'living past',<sup>73</sup> compared with industrialized England, are a commonplace in a long tradition of travel writing on the Balkans by British writers and travellers. In terms of their perception of Greece and its people, however, their observations differ in many respects, which is perhaps an indication of the changes that had taken place in Greece itself; above all, however, it shows the change of mentality in the authors of the sources and the differences between their experiences and those of other British veterans in the not too distant past.

The most obvious feature is the different way in which the Greeks are presented: the negative stereotypes that accompanied the nineteenth-century accounts or those of the Great War, and which were characteristic of a 'Balkanist' approach by Western European observers, have receded and emphasis is now given to promoting the Greeks'

70 IWM/PP/Doc. 7135: R. R. C. Boileau: Letter, May 1941 (last letter).

71 IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.

72 Richter, *Η ιταλο-γερμανική*, 638-9, 643-4; Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika*, 570-85.

73 E. Michail, *The British and the Balkans: Forming Images of Foreign Lands, 1900-1950* (London 2011), 136.

positive qualities. The positive portrayals of the Greeks were unquestionably fed by the British popular culture of the time, which portrayed the Greek as an heroic and inspiring figure, as the descendant of the Ancient Greeks that was standing up to the new barbarians at an otherwise difficult and gloomy time for the Axis's opponents.<sup>74</sup> Our sources, therefore, generally treat the Greeks (soldiers and civilians) with respect and with a sense of camaraderie, as brothers-in-arms. Exceptions to this are the comments on the Greek Army's inability to meet the demands of modern warfare, the lack of references to the Greek Army's support in dealing with the German offensive, and the emphasis that is given to its collapse shortly after the Germans had breached the defensive lines on the northern Greek border. These exceptions, however, are partly due to the poor communication that existed between the Greek troops and 'W' Force.

As regards the campaign itself, its aims and the way in which it was conducted, the veterans' testimonies appear to have been considerably influenced by the public debate on the matter. This applies not only to the later memoirs, which naturally took into account the arguments of both official and unofficial histories, but also to the contemporary sources. The conclusions they draw, however, are not always the same. Alongside those views which are critical of the decision to send British and Dominion troops to Greece in 1941, there are also those which accept the arguments of the British government: the Allies could not have refused to support the only country which had until then successfully dealt with an Axis offensive, both for ethical and political reasons, as well as diplomatic and military ones – the latter concerned the supposed delay of the beginning of the offensive against the USSR, which has been thought to have played a decisive role in the outcome of the war. The sources are more critical of the conduct of the campaign and usually seek to relieve their authors of the blame for wrong decisions, negative actions, prematurely abandoning defensive positions or capitulating to the enemy, and shift it onto others, sometimes Australians or New Zealanders. In this respect, they confirm some of the existing stereotypes that circulated among the Allies, and prefigure the relevant debates in post-war English-language literature.

Above all, the testimonies show the veterans' need to keep the memories of their experiences alive for posterity. Major Barnett ended the 20-page typed letter to his mother with the following words:

The Greek campaign was an amazing experience [...] This letter seems to have run [to] an enormous length [...] I hope if it ever reaches you, you will keep it as it may be interesting for me to read in the years to come.<sup>75</sup>

74 Michail, *The British*, 100.

75 IWM/PP/Doc. 15591: R. A. Barnett: Letter, 5 January 1942.