

# Australia's War: 80 years ago this week

## 24 March 1941





# 24 March 1941 - Egypt

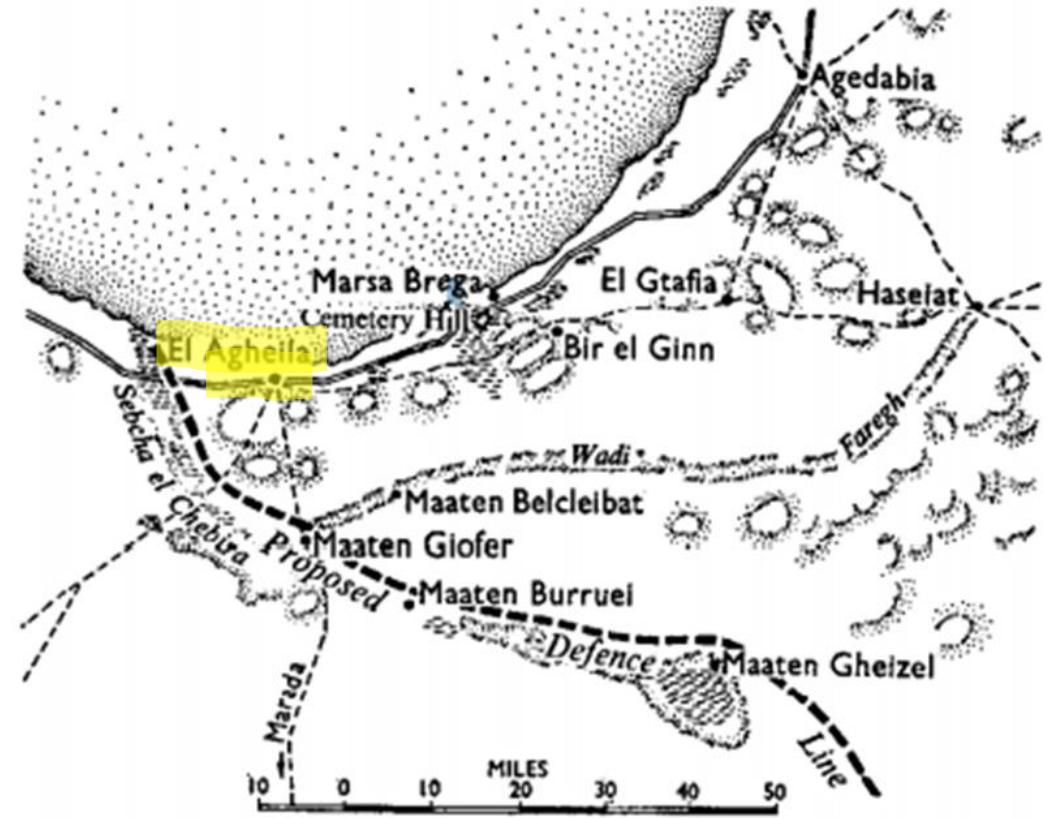
- On the 24th March the First Sea Lord, in a personal signal to Cunningham (photo), told him that both Governments, when agreeing to the use of their forces in Greece, had asked that adequate arrangements might be prepared in advance to withdraw them should it become necessary.
- Cunningham was asked to confirm that he had this possibility in mind "in order that we may be able to reassure the Australian and New Zealand Governments".
- He replied that since the decision was reached to move into Greece, the problem of withdrawal had been much in his thoughts but concluded that he could only guarantee that everything possible would be done to withdraw the Dominion troops with the British.





# 24 March 1941 - Libya

- The British command had planned that on 24th March a platoon should occupy an ambush position west of El Agheila.
- Cope, the platoon commander, approached El Agheila fort at first light in a truck, dismounted and went forward towards the fort on foot.
- Suddenly he saw that it was occupied by the enemy. "He shot two and ran for his life, reaching his truck to get away in a hail of bullets,".
- Soon afterwards the Italian flag was hoisted there and 10 enemy tanks and 20 motor vehicles were reported just east of the fort.



Morshead's proposed defence line

# 24 March 1941 - Greece

- On the 24th after returning from his reconnaissance and meeting with Freyberg, Blamey met Wilson and obtained his agreement to a plan whereby the New Zealand Division should concentrate on digging and wiring defences in the passes, leaving only the divisional cavalry regiment forward of Katerini.
- It was agreed that Blamey should establish his headquarters in the Gerania area as soon as possible and take command of the New Zealanders and the troops in the Veria Pass.



Lieutenant General Blamey, GOC Australian I Corps, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Wilson, commanding general of the Empire expeditionary force ('W' Force) and Major General Freyberg, GOC New Zealand 2nd Division, in 1941 in Greece.

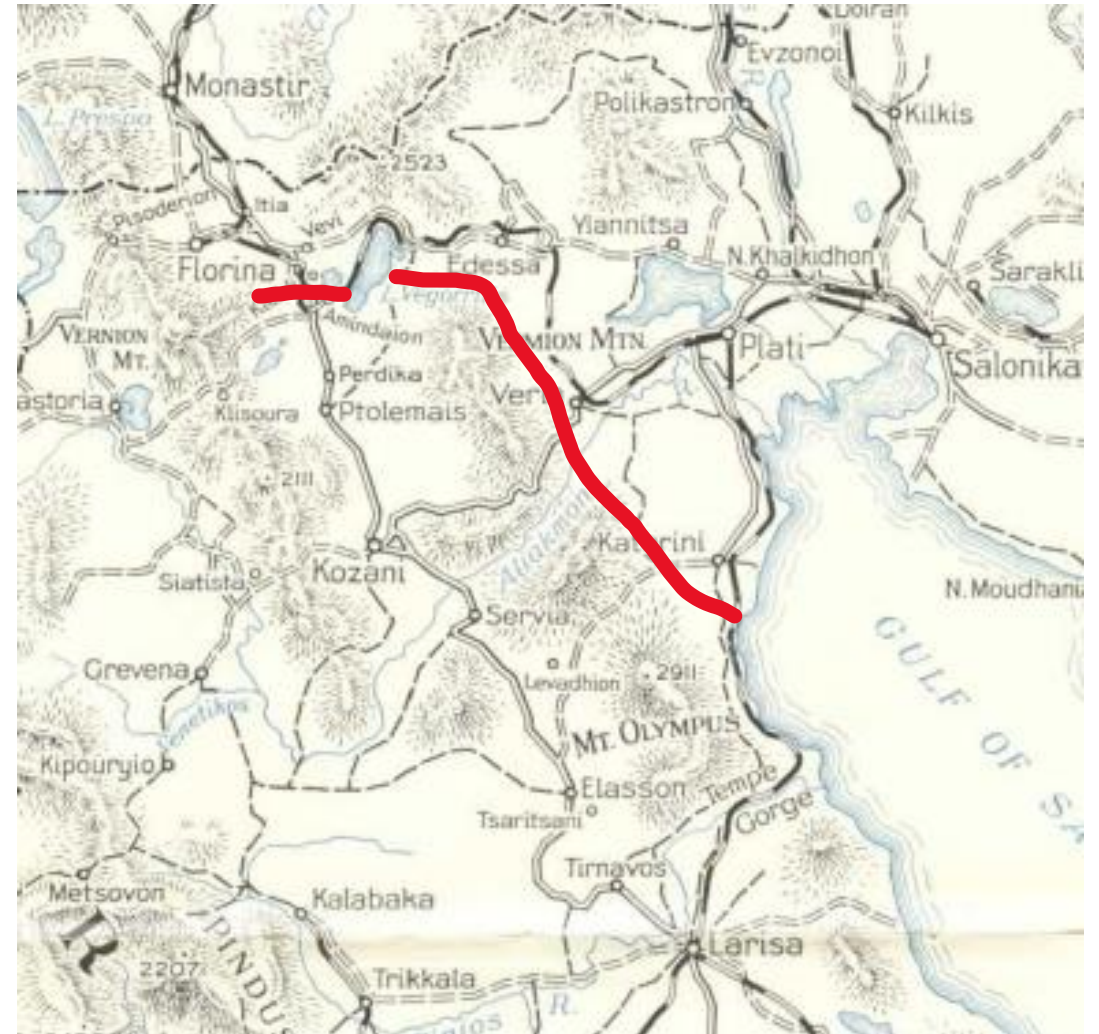
# 24 March 1941 - Greece

- At this time, when negotiations with the Yugoslavs were still in progress, Papagos wished to stand on the Doiran-Rupel-Nestos line defending Salonika.
- Wilson was not willing to do this; nevertheless he agreed to send his armoured brigade forward between the Axios and the Aliakmon as a delaying force, and to instruct the New Zealand Division to take over the coastal sector of the Aliakmon line while the 19th Greek Division moved forward into the Axios Valley and the Doiran Gap to deal with any paratroops who might be landed there.
- Weak though it was, the 19th Greek Division's departure entailed an appreciable loss to the force on the Aliakmon line, where the New Zealanders now became responsible for a front of some 25,000 yards with only two infantry brigades.



# 24 March 1941 - Greece

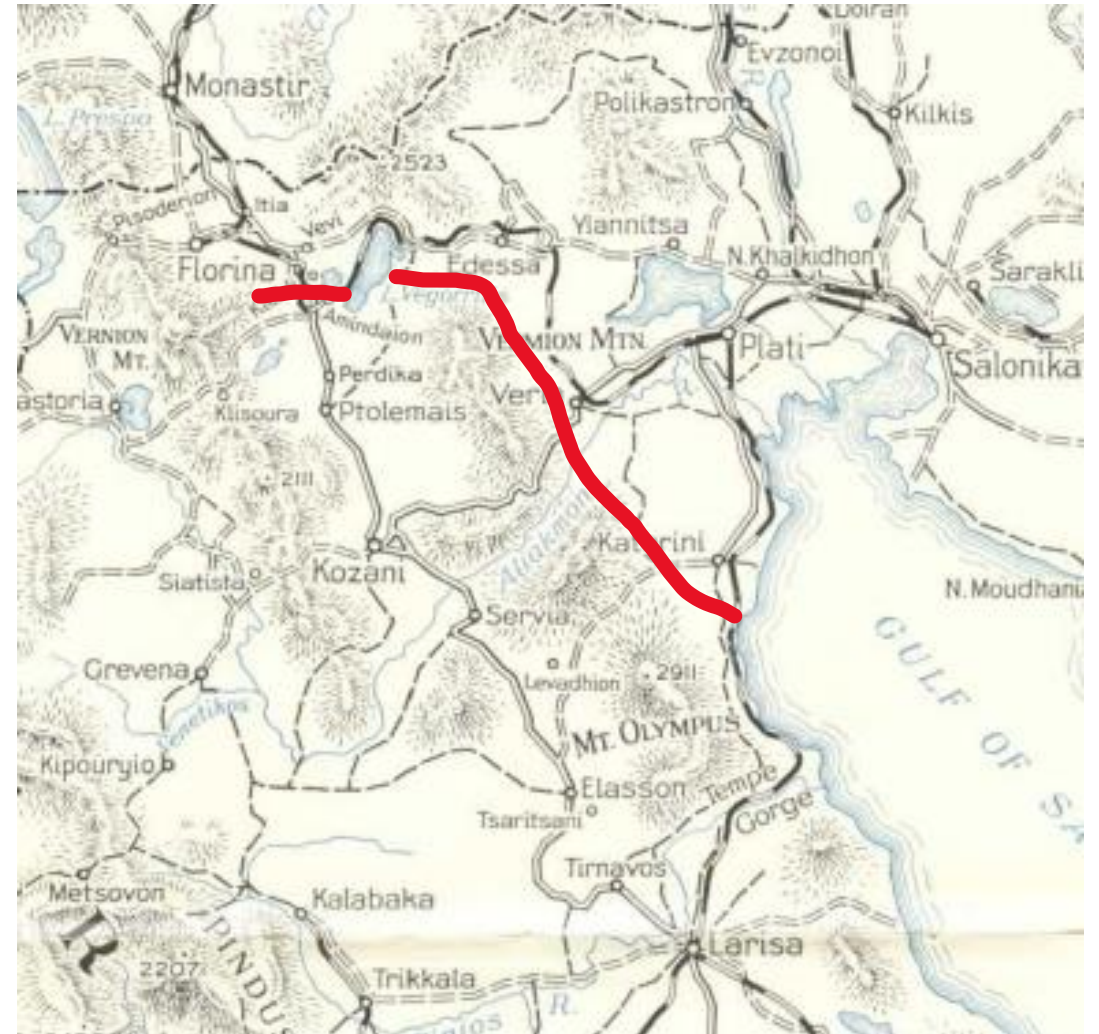
- After Blamey's conference with Wilson Brigadier Galloway, Wilson's chief of staff, informed Freyberg that he should "make certain of the passes round either side of Mount Olympus", but that Wilson considered that the New Zealand front was less likely to be seriously involved than the northern one.
- No order was given to Freyberg to withdraw his forward infantry to the passes.
- In delaying such an order Wilson may have taken into account that he had undertaken to hold a line forward of Katerini and to withdraw to the passes would entail amending his agreement with Papagos;
- and possibly took into account the possibility of having to move forward to support the Yugoslavs.
- He was influenced by the fact that, between Katerini and Edessa, the Florina railway along which travelled most of the supplies for the Greek army in eastern Albania lay east of the Vermion Range and thus forward of the line his force was to occupy.





# 24 March 1941 - Greece

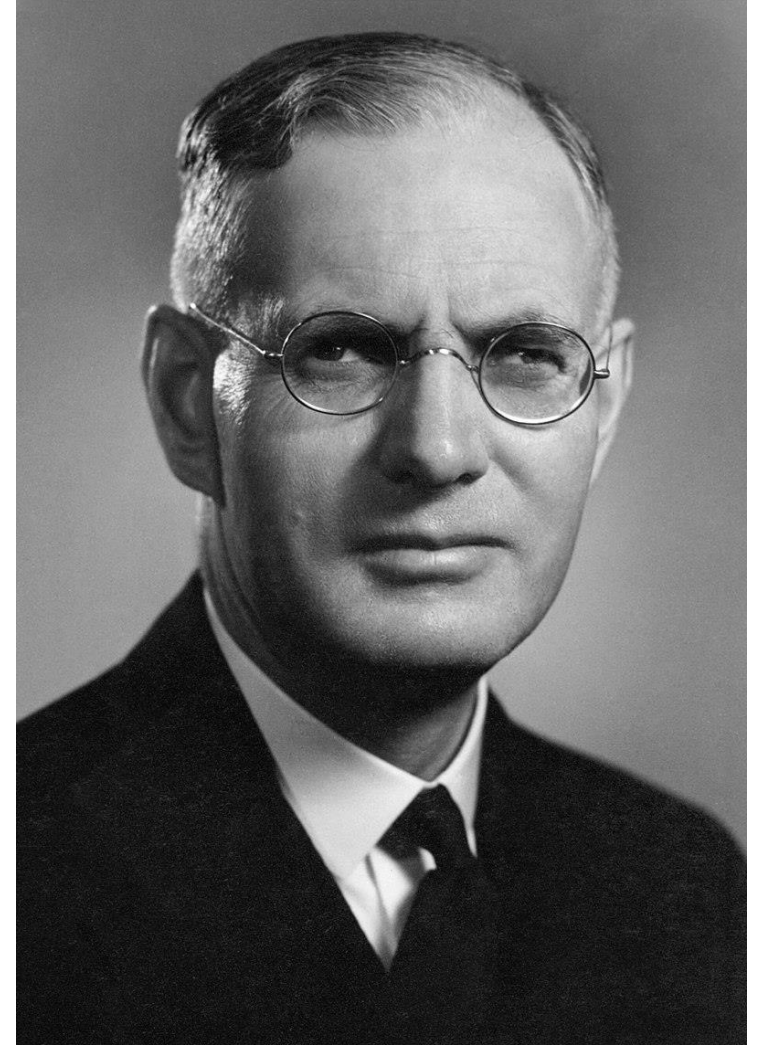
- Some preparations were being made to cope with the danger of a German push through southern Yugoslavia and south through the Monastir Gap.
- Brigadier Charrington had been instructed to prepare a route for withdrawal through the Edessa Pass into the Florina Valley, where he could help to meet an advance from Monastir, and his 3rd Royal Tanks (the cruiser tank regiment) did not move forward to the Axios with the remainder of the brigade but remained at Amindaion in the lake area.
- By the end of March there were in that neighbourhood also half of the 27th New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion and part of the 64th Medium Regiment.
- However, Charrington's headquarters and the remainder of his brigade were about Edessa, so remote from Amindaion that the detachment there was placed under the command of Brigadier Lee.
- Later the 2/1st Australian Anti-Tank Regiment (less one battery) was added to Lee's command.





# 25 March 1941 - Melbourne

- At their meeting on 25th March the Advisory War Council had before them the report of the Anglo-Dutch-Australian Conference at Singapore in February under which increased responsibility in the Far East had fallen to Australia, and Curtin, urging the "paramount importance" of the defence of Australia and New Zealand and pointing to the limits on Australian manpower, urged that serious consideration should be given to the return of some, if not all, of the Australian troops in the Middle East.
- On the next item of business at the meeting—a regular statement on international affairs—the non-Government members of the Council recommended that the War Cabinet should consider the despatch of a cablegram to Menzies suggesting that the time was opportune "to make a re-appreciation of the position of the despatch of British troops and particularly Australian troops to Greece".
- In view of the news that Yugoslavia had joined the Axis, they also urged that the possibilities of defending Greece should be re-examined before Australia was finally committed.



# 25 March 1941 - Brisbane

## Biggest Crowd in the History of Brisbane Welcomes U.S. Naval Men



Crowds cheering American sailors marching through Brisbane as part of a goodwill visit, 1941.  
John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. Neg 158512

# 25 March 1941 - Yugoslavia

- Yugoslavia had been ruled as a dictatorship by the regent, Prince Paul (photo), since the assassination of King Alexander I in 1934.
- After the 1938 Anschluss, the German annexation of Austria; the 1939 Italian occupation of Albania; and the accession of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria to the Tripartite Pact from 20 November 1940 to 1 March 1941, Yugoslavia was bordered by Axis powers on all sides except the southern border with Greece.
- All of those factors, combined with traditional Croatian separatism, caused Paul to be in a great political and patriotic dilemma in March 1941 on how to resist Hitler's diplomatic pressures and concrete political offers to sign Yugoslavia's accession to the pact.
- He was unable to stall since Hitler was in a hurry.
- The potential of Croatian betrayal during a German invasion was the Berlin's main argument during its negotiations with Belgrade.

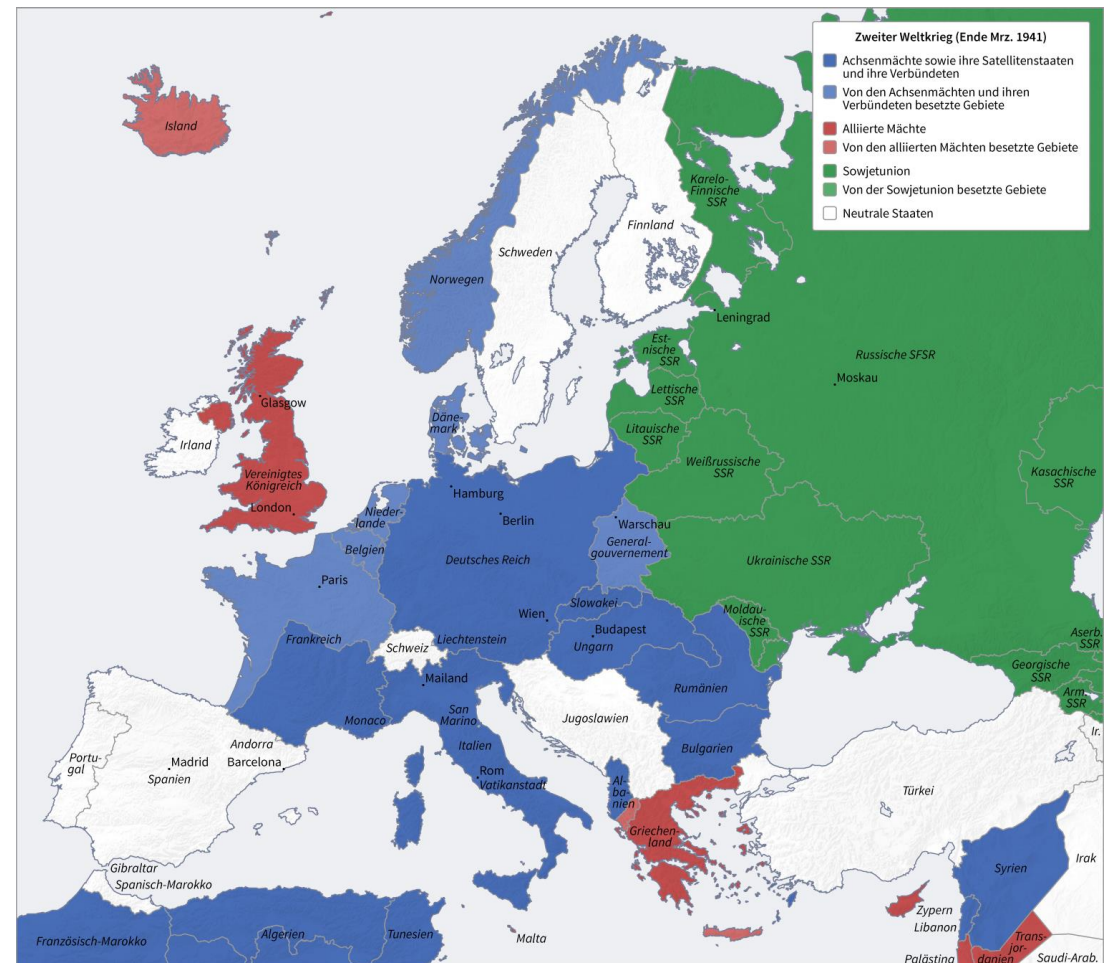




# 25 March 1941 - Yugoslavia



Political map of Europe at the end of October 1940



Political map of Europe at the end of March 1941.

# 25 March 1941 - Yugoslavia

- The Tripartite Pact was an agreement between Germany, Italy and Japan signed on 27 September 1940. It was a defensive military alliance that was eventually joined by Hungary (20 November 1940), Romania (23 November 1940), Bulgaria (1 March 1941).
- Text
  - The Governments of Japan, Germany, and Italy consider it as the condition precedent of any lasting peace that all nations in the world be given each its own proper place, have decided to stand by and co-operate with one another in their efforts in Greater East Asia and the regions of Europe respectively wherein it is their prime purpose to establish and maintain a new order of things ...



Signing ceremony for the Axis Powers Tripartite Pact; seated at front left to right Japan's Ambassador Saburō Kurusu, Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs Galeazzo Ciano and Germany's Führer Adolf Hitler (slumping in his chair). Copyright was seized by the United States government and the photograph is in the public domain in the United States.



# 25 March 1941 - Yugoslavia

- During the negotiations with Hitler, Paul feared that London would demand a formal public declaration of friendship with Britain that would only anger Germany but bring no good.
- British aid was out of the question beyond what they had sent to Greece.
- The Yugoslav Army was inadequately armed and so would not stand a chance against Germany.
- The Germans sought only neutrality and a nonaggression pact.
- On 25 March 1941, Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact with the Axis powers. The agreement was signed at the Belvedere in Vienna.
- Pursuant to the alliance, the parties agreed that the Axis powers would respect Yugoslav sovereignty and territorial integrity, including the Axis refraining from seeking permission to transport troops through Yugoslavia or requesting any military assistance.





# 26 March 1941 - Melbourne

- These opinions were considered by the War Cabinet on the following day (26th March) and it was decided to inform Menzies of the Labour views, adding the War Cabinet's own view that, subject to any information which Menzies might have of a change in the outlook, support for Greece should be maintained.
- The War Cabinet's opinion was that the request for the return of troops from the Middle East was "completely unrealistic and should not be given effect".



# 26 March 1941 – Tasman Sea

THE DIRECTOR OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE

WEEK END 28th March, 1941

COMBINED OPERATIONAL INTELLIGENCE CENTRE

DIARY OF OPERATIONAL-INTELLIGENCE

DATE OF EVENT	NATURE OF REPORT	ACTION TAKEN
26/3	Report from Master ss "TAMBUA" bound Sydney to Newcastle at 0940Z/26. "Violent explosion position 033°34'S 151°57'E. A vessel's navigation lights visible before explosion now disappeared. "Tambua" later reported vessel was bearing 270° distant one mile, at time of explosion. No shipping other than "Tambua" known to be in area.	Air search ordered for 0600K/27, H.M.A.S. "Sydney" instructed to leave Sydney 0730K/27 to support air search. Searches negative. Aircraft from Rathmines sighted wreckage in 33°17'S 152°10'E at 1700. "St Giles" proceeding to locality. "St. Giles" arrived at dark ordered to remain and search at dawn 28/3. Five survivors arrived at Newcastle from Red Funnel Trawler "MilliMummul" the vessel was sunk by the explosion of an old mine brought to the surface in her trawl.
27/3	Floating mine reported in 38°25'S 149°13'E at 0630K by "BAROSSA".	Passed to 20th M.S.F.

# 26 March 1941 – Tasman Sea

- On the 26th March the trawler Millimumul (287 tons) fishing off the New South Wales coast, fouled and exploded a mine in her trawl and was lost with seven of her crew.
- Millimumul sank just on the 100 fathom line thirty miles due east from Broken Bay and twenty miles S.S.E. from where Nimbin was similarly lost in December 1940.
- The mine was sighted in the trawl before it exploded and its condition, heavily covered with marine growth, indicated that it came from a field as old as that which sank Nimbin.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

303619

Trawler Millimumul



# 26 March 1941 - Libya

- The headquarters and two battalions (2/24th and 2/48th) of the 26th Brigade, less one company of the 2/48th detached for garrison duty at Derna, were meanwhile encamped at Ain el Gazala, while the third battalion (2/23rd) had remained at Tobruk.
- The 24th Brigade (two battalions only) arrived at Mersa Matruh from Palestine on 24th March. Brigadier Godfrey, who had succeeded Brigadier Plant to its command, joined it there. On the 26th it arrived in Tobruk.
- On that day Brigadier Tovell's headquarters, the 2/24th Battalion (Major Tasker, temporarily in command), and two companies of the 2/23rd Battalion (under Captain Spier) left Ain el Gazala to join the division in the forward area.
- Another company of the 2/23rd went to Derna, while the remaining company and the 2/48th Battalion were engaged in guarding (and evacuating) prisoners of war at the cages at El Adem and Tobruk.
- Meanwhile the 5th Royal Tank Regiment, the only battalion of the armoured brigade equipped with cruiser tanks, was dispatched from El Adem to the front, some 400 road-miles distant.

# 26 March 1941 - Libya



# 26 March 1941 - Libya

- As the 5th Royal Tank Regiment moved up, its worn-out cruisers broke down at an alarming rate.
- The aim was to equip the other two tank units with:
- 3rd Hussars—2 squadrons of light tanks, one squadron of Italian M13s.
- 6th Royal Tank Regiment—1 squadron of light tanks, 2 squadrons of M13's
- But the process of equipping with the Italian tanks was still in train and the light tanks were worn and unreliable.
- By contrast, the Marmon Herrington armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards, driven by 30 horse-power Ford V8s, were mechanically reliable, though their springing was not equal to the strain of cross-desert running.



Marmon-Herrington armoured cars on patrol in the Western Desert, 28 November 1941. Mark II, "Middle East Model" denoted the vehicles serving with British forces in the North African campaign. This variant was fitted with a Boys anti-tank rifle and a single coaxial Bren light machine gun.



# 26 March 1941 - Libya

- Marmon-Herringtons were a series of armoured vehicles that were produced in South Africa.
- Marmon-Herringtons were dependable, if light and undergunned, vehicles.
- Allied troops modified Mk IIs with captured anti-tank guns.
- As the turret made no provision for larger armament, it was simply removed.

Mk II with an Italian Breda 20 mm gun near Tobruk, 8 May 1941.



## 25-26 March 1941- Mediterranean

- From the 25th March there was marked increase of Italian air reconnaissance to the south and west of Greece and Crete, and over Alexandria. Impending action on the enemy's part was indicated, possibly against the convoys, then the most vulnerable point for the British.
- Cunningham's problem was so to dispose his forces to meet this threat as not unduly to interfere with the convoy program, nor to cause the enemy to defer his intended operation. To take the fleet to sea the Aegean covering forces and "Lustre" close escort forces, already sparse, had to be drawn upon.
- Should the Italians become aware that the fleet was at sea , they could defer their operation and maintain a state of suspense which would impose an increased strain on the covering and escort forces.
- As Italian action appeared imminent, Cunningham decided to clear the threatened area. Convoy "GA.8" was held at Piraeus, and "AG.9" was ordered to maintain its northward course until nightfall of the 27th, and then reverse course towards Alexandria.

# 26 March 1941 - Libya

- The Air Board had been requested on 7th March by Headquarters R.A.F. Middle East to maintain No 3 squadron at the established figure (twenty - one) plus five, with a reserve of ten pilots.
- To meet immediate needs, the same expedient adopted by No. 10 the previous June—acceptance of non-Australian pilots on attachment—was inevitable. Three pilots had arrived from No. 73 on 22nd February and three more on 5th March
- On 26<sup>th</sup> March two South African pilots arrived.
- Thereafter Australian pilots trained under the Empire Training Scheme were posted to No. 3.
- All these expedients were strongly denounced by the Air Board which desired to retain its character as a complete squadron of the permanent R.A.A.F.
- Yet another administrative difficulty arose because three officers and thirty-four airmen, nominally members of No. 3, were still attached to R.A.F. squadrons.

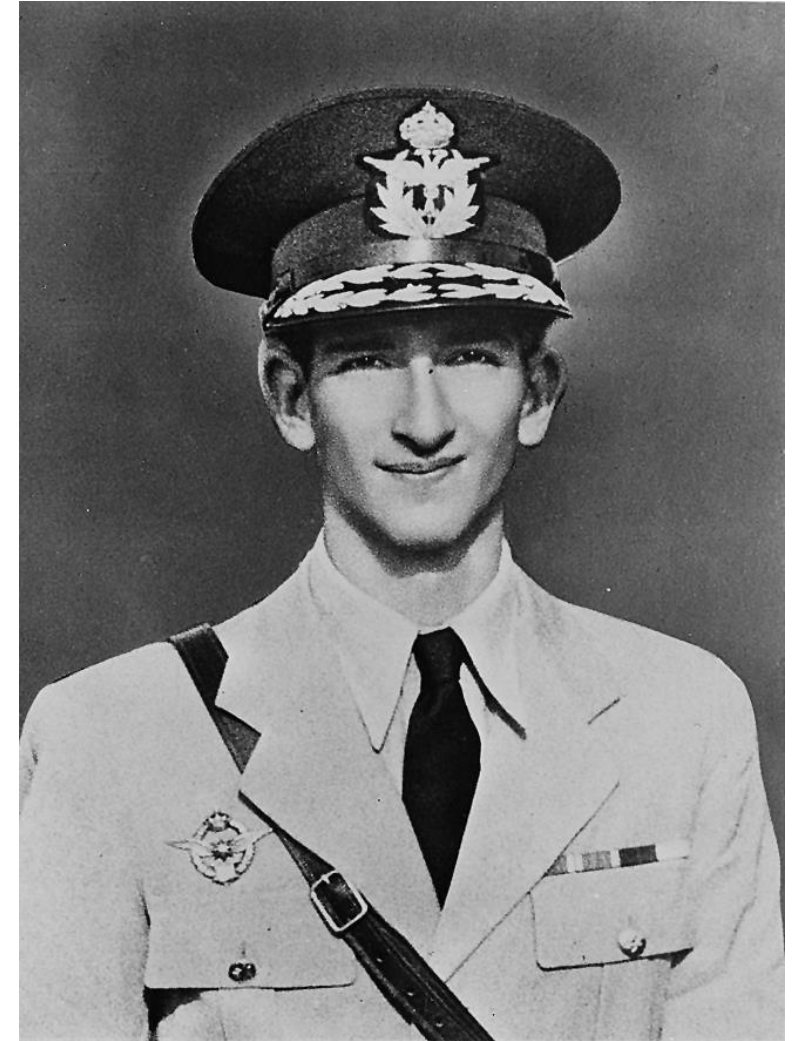


Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett RAF, (Chief of the Air Staff) centre.



# 27 March 1941 - Yugoslavia

- On the 27th March a military revolt overthrew the Yugoslav Regency, acclaimed the young King, Peter II, and set up a government under General Simovic.
- The coup had been planned for several months, but the signing of the Tripartite Pact spurred the organisers to carry it out, encouraged by the British Special Operations Executive.
- The Communist Party of Yugoslavia played no part in the coup, although it made a significant contribution to the mass street protests in many cities that signalled popular support for it once it had occurred.
- Simović's new government refused to ratify Yugoslavia's signing of the Tripartite Pact, but did not openly rule it out.
- Hitler, angered by the coup and anti-German incidents in Belgrade, gathered his senior officers and ordered that Yugoslavia be crushed without delay.



Peter II, 17 years old at the time of coup, was declared to be of age. Peter heard of his coming of age for the first time on the radio.

# 27 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- The first report of the Italians was a sighting by an Australian pilot of No. 230 (Sunderland ) Squadron (Flying Officer Bohm) from Malta of three cruisers and a destroyer 80 miles east of the south-eastern corner of Sicily, steering south-east; and was received by Cunningham in Alexandria at noon on the 27th.
- Sqn Ldr R. S. Bohm, 40596 RAF. 230, 547 and 190 Sqns RAF. Regular air force offr; of Rockhampton, Qld; b. 18 Jan 1915.



# 27 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- Pridham-Wippell with the cruisers Orion, Ajax, Perth and Gloucester, and the destroyers Ilex, Hasty, Hereward and Vendetta, was instructed to be to the southward of Gavdos Island (south of Crete) at daylight on the 28th March.
- His force sailed from Suda Bay in the early afternoon of the 27th.





# 27 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- At dusk on the 27th, when its departure would not be seen, Cunningham sailed the fleet, flying his flag in Warspite, with Barham, Valiant and Formidable; the destroyers of the 14th Flotilla, Jervis, Janus, Nubian and Mohawk, under Captain Mack in Jervis; and Greyhound, Griffin, Hotspur and Havock under Captain Waller RAN in Stuart.
- Course and speed were set to rendezvous with Pridham-Wippell south of the western end of Crete at 5 p.m. on the 28th.

# 27 March 1941 - Mediterranean



The  
Mediterranean  
Battle Fleet at  
sea

# 27 March 1941 - Greece

- Most of the men travelled north in crowded railway waggons, but those who went by road in long processions of trucks were hailed by the country folk even more cordially than in Athens. Groups of peasants shouted joyfully, waved and gave the thumbs-up sign.
- On 27th March the 16th Brigade Group bivouacked on grassy slopes in the Servia Pass with Olympus rising above them to the east and the Aliakmon River below them to the north.

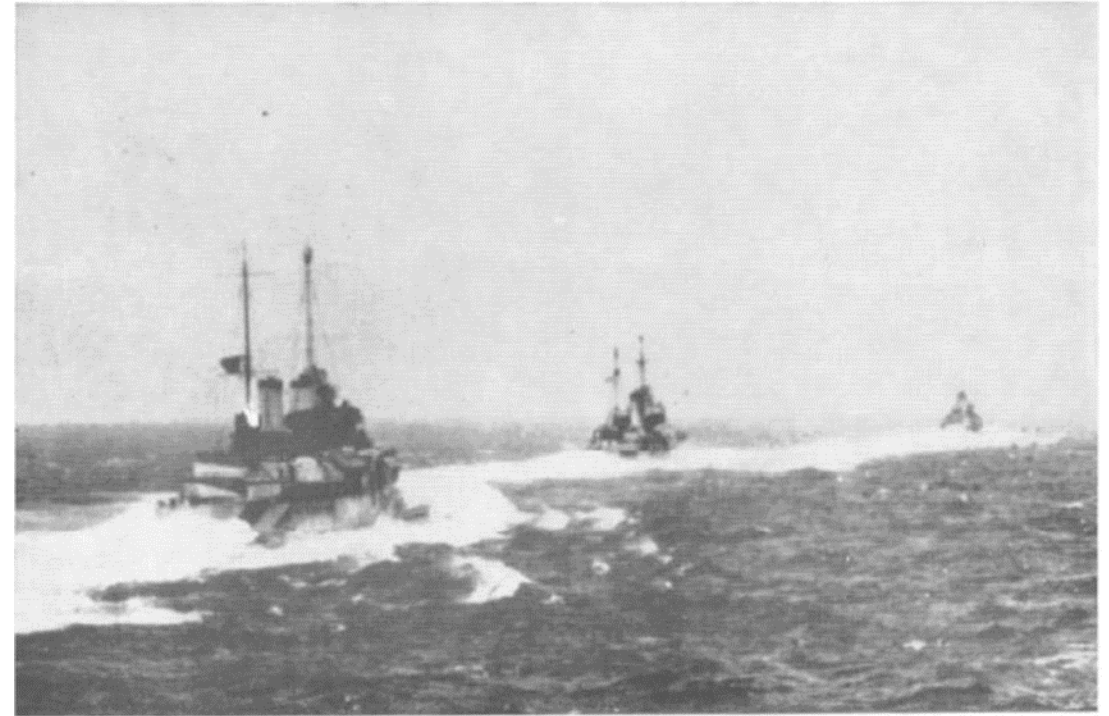
# 27 March 1941 - Washington

- From 29 January to 27 March secret Anglo-American staff talks had been held in Washington. These resulted in an agreement between the service staffs:
  - for Anglo-American cooperation short of war in the Atlantic, and
  - for dissuading the Japanese from further aggression in the Pacific, and
  - for full cooperation when and if Axis aggression forced the United States into war.
- The Agreement was incorporated in the ABC-1 report.
- Fundamental to this agreement was the American basic strategy of beating Hitler first.
- Participants
  - US
    - Admirals Ghormley and Turner
    - Generals Embick, Miles and Gerow
  - British
    - Admirals Bellairs and Dankwaerts
    - General Morris
    - Air Vice Marshall Slessor



# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- Just before 8 a.m. on the 28th an aircraft from Formidable reported four cruisers and six destroyers about thirty miles south of Gavdhos Island, steering S.S.E.
- This was roughly the position of Pridham-Wippell's force, and both in that force itself and in Warspite, the report was at first thought to refer inaccurately to it; but half an hour later Pridham-Wippell's sighting report of three cruisers and destroyers to the northward of him was received in the flagship.
- When sighted by Pridham-Wippell, the enemy cruisers were steering S.S.E. on a slightly converging course on his port quarter. They were identified as 8-inch gun ships.
- As they had superiority in speed, range and gun power, Pridham-Wippell, steaming in line ahead in the order Orion, Ajax, Perth and Gloucester, tried to lead them back to the approaching battle fleet.



*(Petty Officer G. A. Balshaw, R.A.N.)*  
H.M.A.S. Perth, H.M.S. Ajax and H.M.S. Orion at Battle of Matapan, 28th March 1941.

# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- The Italians opened fire at 8.12 a.m. at a range of nearly thirteen miles, and concentrated with some accuracy on Gloucester, who "snaked the line" to avoid hits.
- At 8.29, when the range had closed by a mile or so, Gloucester opened fire, but her three salvos fell short. The enemy hauled away to S.E. by E., after which, although he resumed the more southerly course and continued to fire, his own salvos fell short.
- At 8.55 a.m. the Italians ceased fire and turned away to the northward, steadying on a north-west by westerly course. Pridham-Wippell followed round to try to keep touch. Vendetta, which had engine trouble, was now ordered back to Alexandria.
- The battle fleet, pushing along at 22 knots, was suffering delay from the necessity of Formidable turning in to a following wind to fly off aircraft, and Valiant was ordered on ahead to support the cruisers.
- Reports reaching the flagship from aircraft gave a confusing picture . They included those of another enemy force to the northward of the Italian force, "battleships " being mentioned on one occasion ; but it was not clear to Cunningham whether this was actually another force, or either of those already in touch with each other.
- Shortly before 11 a.m., however, the staff in Warspite were electrified by the interception of three emergency signals made by Pridham-Wippell to his cruisers: "Make smoke by all available means," "Turn together to 180 degrees," "Proceed at your utmost speed." They told Cunningham, before the amplifying report reached him, that Pridham-Wippell had sighted the enemy battle fleet.

# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

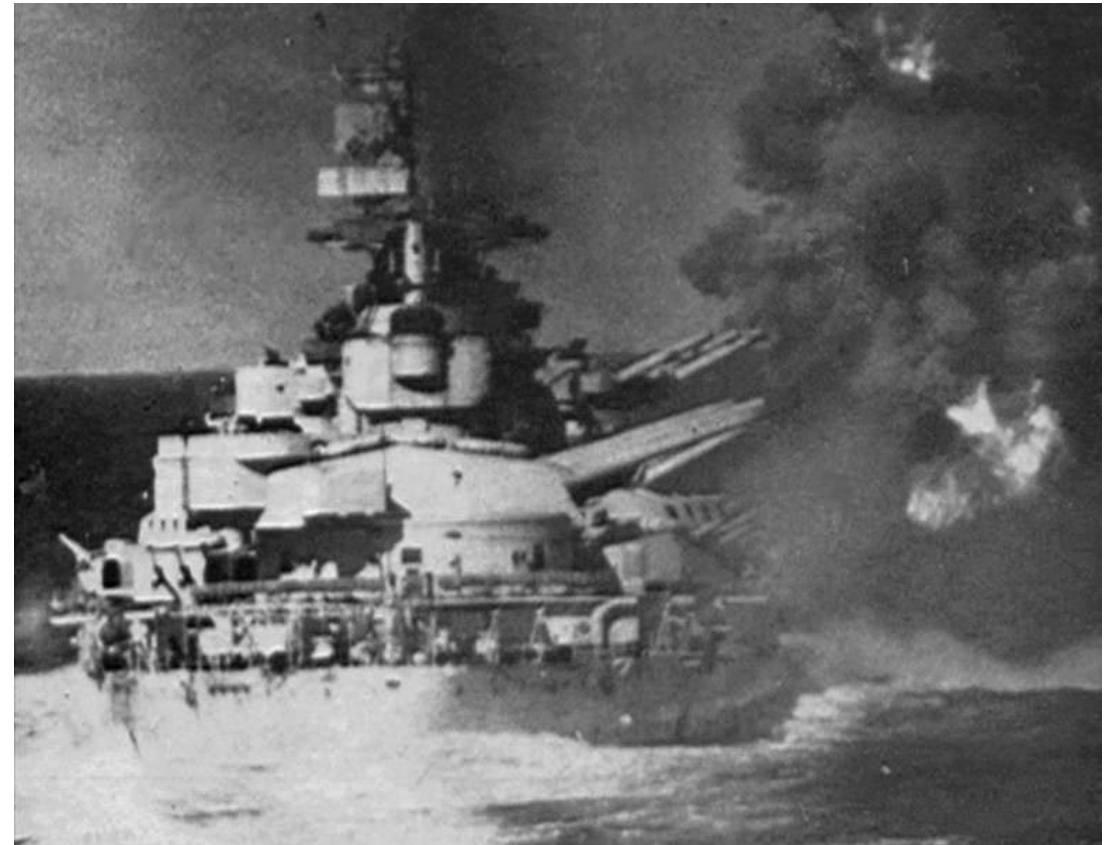
- On the basis of air reports D'Albiac ordered Nos. 84 and 113 at Paramythia to provide striking forces.
- On 28th March Boehm led five Blenheims on this task and although two were forced to return through engine trouble he continued with the others and personally claimed two direct hits` on a cruiser with 500-lb semi-armour piercing bombs.
- F-Lt D. G. Boehm, 39452 RAF; 84 Sqn RAF. Regular air force offr; of Torrens Park, SA; b. Adelaide, 11 Sep 1915.



Armourers of No. 113 Squadron preparing to load a Blenheim Mk I prior to a raid on Tobruk, Libya, circa 1942

# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- At 10.58, Pridham-Wippell reported two battleships sixteen miles to the north of the British force and steering S.S.E.
- At 11 a.m. Cunningham was some 70 miles from Pridham-Wippell.
- The British cruisers, speeding southwards at 31 knots and making smoke, pursued by the battleship at about the same speed, came under immediate and accurate fire, and during the next half hour both Orion and Gloucester were straddled by 15-inch salvos, Gloucester repeatedly.



Vittorio Veneto firing on Allied cruisers near the Island of Gavdos



# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- In Warspite, Cunningham's hand was forced by the need rapidly to support the cruisers in their dangerous situation. He was anxious to conceal his presence and if possible work round the Italians so that they could not, with their superior speed, evade a fleet action.
- In the circumstances, however, he ordered Formidable to launch an air attack against the battleships.
- The attack was delivered, with one probable torpedo hit reported, at 11.27 a.m. on a single battleship now identified as Vittorio Veneto.
- The Italians immediately broke off the action and turned to the north-west.
- The cruisers then ceased making smoke, and when the horizon was clear at 11.48, no enemy was in sight. Pridham-Wippell steered eastward to gain touch with the battle fleet, which was done at 12.30.
- The British then settled down to a chase, with the cruisers ahead at maximum visual signal range from the fleet, which was making about 22 knots.

# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- Vittorio Veneto was not again sighted until 3.15 p.m., when an aircraft from Formidable reported her, in company with four destroyers, sixty-five miles W.N.W. of Warspite.
- A second air attack with torpedoes reported three hits, and that the battleship's speed was reduced to eight knots.
- During the afternoon Fleet Air Arm torpedo bombers from Maleme, in Crete, and R.A.F. bombers from Greece, also attacked the enemy cruiser squadrons, but scored no hits.



Fairey Albacore in flight.

# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean



Vittorio Veneto withdraws from the battle area after being torpedoed by RN aircraft.

It soon became apparent that the reported speed reduction of Vittorio Veneto was optimistic.

Although damaged, she was making a good 12 to 15 knots and would not be overhauled before dark.

# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- PridhamWippell was ordered to press on and gain touch.
- By 7.15 p.m., with expert observers' reports from Warspite's aircraft, Cunningham had a clearer view of the situation.
- The Italian forces had concentrated in support of Vittorio Veneto, and were proceeding W.N.W. in five columns at 15 knots, about forty-five miles from Warspite.



Admiral Pridham-Wippell. In November 1941 he survived the sinking of his flagship Barham, being blown off his bridge into the water by the explosion.



# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- By 7.25 p.m. Pridham-Wippell was in radar and visual touch with some of the enemy, and between 7.35 and 7.45 saw, twelve miles away, the sky "filled with streams of tracer ammunition of various colours" as the Italians fought off a torpedo bomber attack by Formidable aircraft.
- In that attack the cruiser Pola was torpedoed in the engine room, and left stopped.
- Cunningham at 8.40 p.m., keeping a skeleton screen of four ships of the 10th Flotilla, commanded by Captain Waller RAN,— Stuart and Havock to starboard and Greyhound and Griffin to port,—ordered the rest of the destroyers, both 14th and 2nd Flotillas, to attack.



Captain Hector (Hec) Waller DSO RAN, smoking a pipe on the bridge of HMAS Stuart.

# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

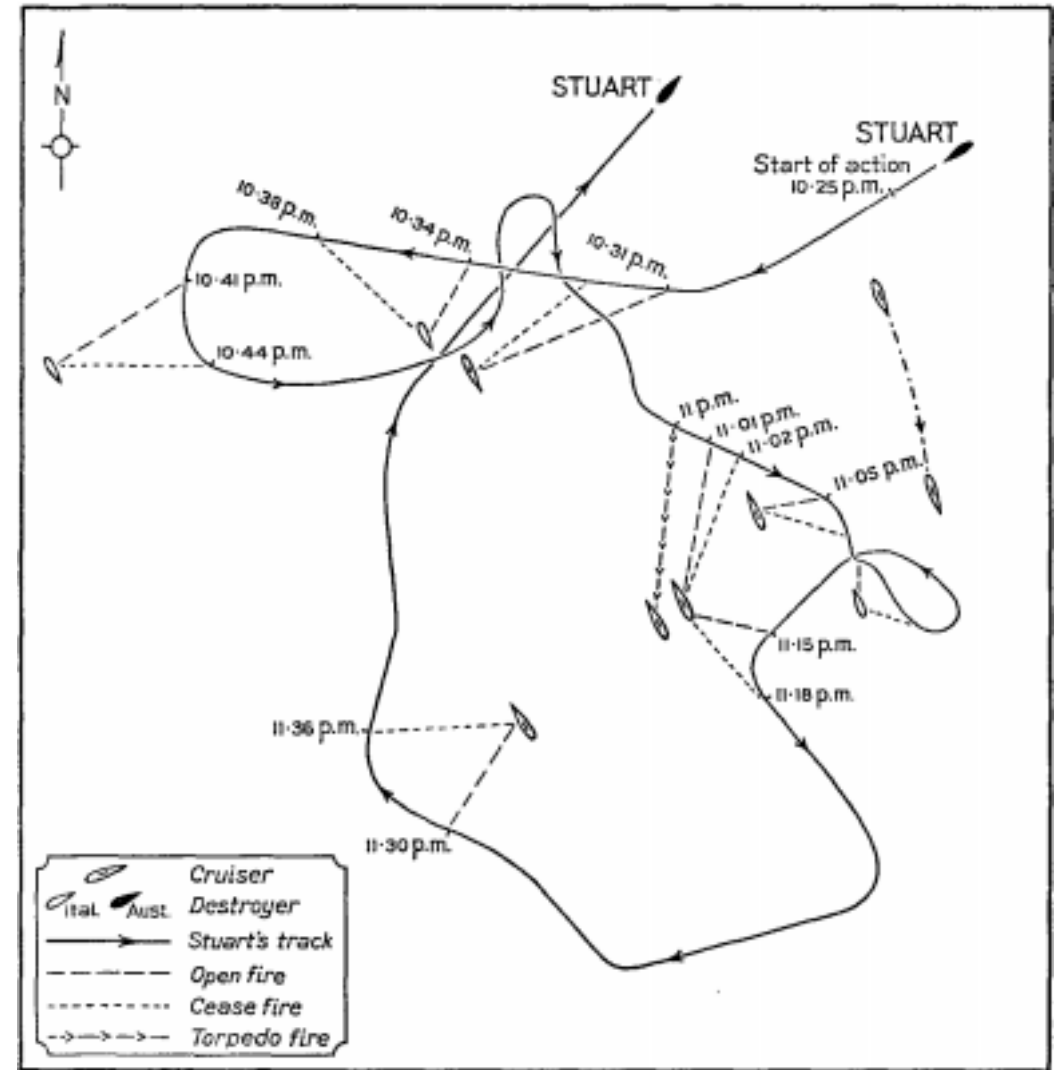
- The destroyer striking force led by Mack in Jervis, was pressing ahead with the object of passing to the northward of the enemy and attacking from the van.
- Close astern of the Italians, Pridham-Wippell was trying to regain visual touch with the enemy, which had been lost subsequent to the air attack at 7.45.
- Mack's striking force continued unsuccessfully searching for the Italians to the westward. Pridham-Wippell steered northwards, hampered in his search by his desire to avoid running foul of Mack's destroyers in the darkness.
- Pola had been located, stopped or proceeding very slowly, by Pridham-Wippell, who at 8.15 p.m. picked her up by radar six miles distant. She was not sighted, but because of her size Pridham-Wippell thought she might be Vittorio Veneto. He argued that, if so, she was "fixed" for the battle fleet. If not the battleship, that vessel remained to be found, and at 8.33 he decided to go on searching to the northward.

# 28 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- Cunningham received Pridham-Wippell's radar report at 9.11 p.m. and altered course to close the unknown ship. At 10.10 p.m. Valiant, the only battleship with radar, picked her up at a distance of six miles on the port bow. Cunningham altered course together towards, and the destroyers were ordered over to the starboard side.
- Then, unexpectedly, at 10.25 p.m., two large cruisers ("standing up like haystacks" , one of those on Warspite's bridge later recalled) with a smaller ship ahead, were sighted about four miles distant, crossing the battle fleet's bows from starboard to port.
- They came on quite unsuspecting. The battle fleet was turned back into line ahead, and Formidable hauled out to starboard. In silence which, on Warspite's bridge could almost be felt, the two forces closed, port to port.
- There were the quiet voices of the gun control people putting the guns on the target, and finally, when the range was only 3,800 yards, a voice from the director tower: "Director layer sees the target." The firing gongs sounded, and simultaneously with the great flash of the Warspite's 15-inch guns the enemy ships were illuminated by searchlights. unprepared , with guns trained fore and aft and men running along their decks.
- "Full in the beam I saw our six great projectiles flying through the air five out of the six hit a few feet below the level of the cruiser's upper deck and burst with splashes of brilliant flame. The Italians were quite unprepared. Their guns were trained fore and aft. They were helplessly shattered before they could put up any resistance. Captain Douglas Fisher, the captain of Warspite, was a gunnery officer of note. When he saw the first salvo hit he was heard to say in a voice of wondering surprise: Good Lord! We've hit her!"
- The action lasted less than five minutes, by which time the Italian cruisers were shattered, blazing wrecks.
- At 10.30 the enemy destroyers attacked with torpedoes, and the battle fleet turned together 90 degrees to starboard while the British destroyers counter-attacked . At 10.35 the battle fleet re-formed in line ahead on a northerly course, and the four screening destroyers were released to sink the two damaged cruisers.

# 28 March 1941 - Med

- Stuart's account of the next hour is an exciting one. It was spent, mostly at high speed on constantly changing courses, in blackness lit only by the phosphorescent gleam of wash and wake; under the pallid light of star shells; among briefly seen silhouettes of ships firing streams of coloured tracers; and to the crash and flash of gun fire.
- Cunningham, in his dispatch, said that the movements and the results achieved by H.M.A.S. Stuart's division during the night remain most obscure.



Sketch of Stuart's course and action.



## 29 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- At 11.18 p.m. when a signal was received from the flagship: "All forces not engaged in sinking the enemy retire north-east." By this time Stuart had lost touch with the rest of the division, had no torpedoes with which to "engage in sinking the enemy", and retired as ordered.
- At twenty minutes past midnight Havock found Pola, still afloat and unharmed beyond the original torpedo damage. Havock at first reported her find as the battleship, and this brought Mack back hotfoot from the westward with his destroyer flotillas.
- On his arrival he took Jervis alongside Pola, which was in a state of indescribable confusion, lacking any order or discipline, and with many of her sailors drunk. The crew was taken off, and at 4.10 a.m. on the 29th March Mack sank her with torpedoes, having previously sunk Zara by similar means.

# 28 – 30 March 1941 - Greece

- With the object of renewing efforts to obtain Yugoslav cooperation, Eden and Dill, who had been delayed at Malta on the way home, flew to Athens, and conferred with Wilson on 28th and 30th March and agreed that if the Yugoslavs would join the Allies it would probably be essential to hold at least the line covering the Struma River and the Doiran Gap, through which the road and railway from Salonika entered Yugoslavia.
- At a meeting with the Greek leaders it was agreed to tell the Yugoslavs that if they would attack into Bulgaria and Albania when the Germans advanced into Greece, the Allies would reinforce the line of the Bulgarian frontier and the Nestos River.
- Papagos informed the British leaders that the Yugoslavs had 24 divisions of infantry and three of cavalry. It was this powerful army that he had always wanted to have on his northern flank.
- With its help he could swiftly dispose of the Italians in Albania and then might reasonably hope to bog down the Germans on the eastern flank .



General Sir John Dill, CIGS, in Egypt, 18 February 1941.

# 29 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- Waller remarked on the excellent behaviour of Stuart's company, whose guns' crews were mainly composed of sixty Reserve ordinary seamen who had been in the ship only five weeks. The majority of them had never previously seen a gun fired at night.
- "B" gun's crew included five ordinary seamen who had joined Stuart, their first ship, in Alexandria two days before the action.
- They were, Waller said, rather anxious to know if this was a normal Mediterranean night.
- The large number of crew who were newly joined was due to the transfer of experienced crew to Britain to commission four new N class destroyers,
- The Australian captain had a commendatory word for the flashless propellant used by the Italians. "It prevents one's own men knowing a salvo is on the way till it is too late to matter; and it is very easy to pick out one's own hits on the enemy."



Lieutenant Commander Rhoades CO of Vendetta confers with Captain Waller at sea in the Mediterranean

# 29 March 1941 - Mediterranean

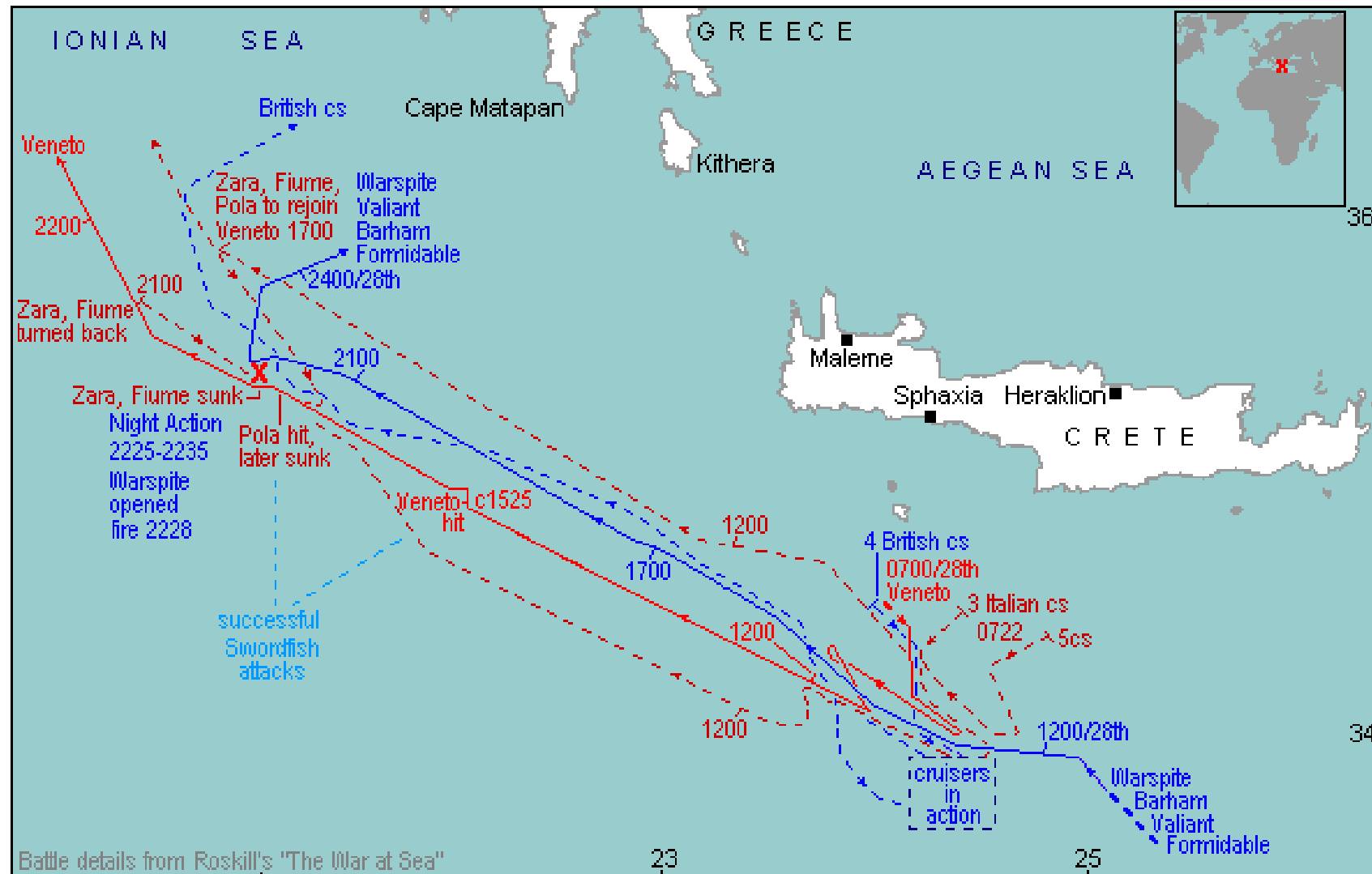
- Albacore torpedo aircraft from Formidable had scored one damaging hit on the battleship slowing it down and forcing it to withdraw and one hit on the cruiser Pola leaving it dead in the water.
- The Italians had lost three 8-inch gun cruisers Zara, Pola, and Fiume, and the destroyers Alfieri and Carducci; and about 2,400 officers and men.
- The British lost five aircraft, the crew of one being saved.



Fairey Albacore in flight.



# 28/29 March 1941 - Mediterranean



Map by Gordon Smith, 2006, please acknowledge [www.naval-history.net](http://www.naval-history.net)

Australia's War 24 March 41 ©Jerry McBrien Wk 7

# 29/30 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- At daylight all the British forces met and steamed back to the scene of the night's battle. They found a calm sea covered with a film of oil and strewn with rafts and wreckage, hundreds of Italian survivors, and many floating corpses.
- The destroyers rescued as many survivors as possible (in all, including those from Pola, British ships rescued 900) but rescue operations were broken off by attacks by German dive bombers.
- The bombing cost many Italian lives. Cunningham withdrew to the eastward leaving some hundreds of Italians unrescued, but signalling their exact position to the Italian Admiralty.
- Greek destroyers picked up 110 survivors on the 29th, and the Italians sent out the hospital ship Gradisca (13,870 tons), which eventually saved another 160.
- During the afternoon of the 29th the fleet was heavily bombed, but escaped damage. It reached Alexandria in the afternoon of 30th March.
- Perth and Ajax, and Stuart and Griffin, previously detached, proceeded to the Aegean to resume work with the "Lustre " convoys.

# 29/30 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- That night (29th) the southbound "GA.8" left the Greek port escorted by Stuart, Hereward, and Griffin, fresh from their adventures of the night before.
- The following day the cruiser Bonaventure joined the escort, and the convoy proceeded south - east across the Mediterranean. The night came very still and black, with no sound but the swish of the sea breaking from the ships' bows.
- Just after 3 a.m. on the 31st, midway between Crete and Alexandria, those on Stuart's bridge heard two heavy explosions on the far side of the screen. Bonaventure had been struck by two torpedoes and sank almost immediately.
- Ordering Hereward to pick up survivors and Griffin to continue with the convoy, Stuart raced across and attacked intensively with depth charges. She was herself near-missed by a torpedo which exploded in her wake fifty yards astern as she ran in.
- Seven attacks were made by Stuart, and two by Hereward after that ship had rescued 310 survivors from the cruiser. The submarine broke surface after Stuart's second attack, crash dived, and apparently escaped. The convoy reached Alexandria late in the afternoon of the 31st without further incident.

# Late March 1941 - Atlantic

- Three Sunderlands received damage from bomb and anti-aircraft shell fragments in the air raids on 20 and 22<sup>nd</sup> March and were unserviceable for some days.
- So when the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau reached Brest late in the month it was necessary to recall one of the Sunderlands from Oban to perform the routine blockading patrol.
- The detachment had continued its work with convoys and in addition to another inconclusive attack on an enemy submarine on 5th March the Sunderlands frustrated several air attacks on convoys.



(Air Ministry)  
A Sunderland flying-boat of No. 10 Squadron completing its take-off run while on detachment to Oban in western Scotland.



# End of March 1941 - Freetown

- Eventually three aircraft reached Freetown separately towards the end of the month (March).
- Operations were begun immediately to protect convoys in that area and a number of successful searches were flown for survivors from torpedoed ships.



View of the flying boat station at Jui Sierra Leone showing Sunderland Mk 111s of No 95 squadron RAF.

# March 1941 – Indochina

- The Japanese-mediated peace between French Indochina and Thailand led to a Franco-Japanese pact with six articles.
  - Japan would obtain a virtual monopoly on Indochina's production of rice, rubber and coal.
  - Japanese interests would get a free hand in the exploitation of French Indochina's natural resources, especially minerals.
  - Japanese military garrisons would be established on the border between Indochina and China proper.
  - Japanese inspectors would be stationed in all of Indochina's customs houses.
  - A Japanese naval base was to be established at Cam Ranh Bay, while the Japanese would also acquire a defense concession at Saigon.
  - Indochina was to allow Japan the free use of all its present air bases, while new bases were to be established wherever Japan thought necessary.
- This enabled Japan to dominate the whole of Indo-China and brought her within bombing distance of Singapore.



## A map of Southeast Asia with labels for Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines. Two yellow location pins are placed on the coast of Vietnam: one labeled 'Saigon' and another labeled 'Cam Ranh Bay'. The map also shows the Gulf of Thailand, the Malay Peninsula, and various islands and cities in the region. The Google My Maps logo is visible at the bottom center.

# 30 March 1941 - London

- Hopes were buoyed when a coup d'etat in Yugoslavia overthrew the government that had allied itself with the Axis and an optimistic telegram from Churchill to Fadden on 30th March revived the expectation that a Balkan front, with Turkey, might be formed mounting seventy divisions from the Adriatic to the Black Sea.





## Anzacs leave for Greece | Australian War Memorial ([awm.gov.au](http://awm.gov.au))

- HMAS Perth, takes Australian, British and Palestinian troops to Greek port.
- 11 minutes
- 35mm/b&w/silent
- George Silk.



## [\[HMAS Stuart in the Mediterranean and Middle East\] | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#)

- Home movie by Jack Carey of HMAS Stuart. 22 minutes 9.5mm/b&w/silent
- Opens with shots from HMAS Stuart of the bombardment of Bardia by the Royal Navy battleships HMS Malaya and HMS Ramillies. HMAS Stuart did not fire so Petty Officer Carey was able to film the action.
- A 360 degree pan of Alexandria Harbour and warships and other vessels at harbour.
- Shots of aerial bombardment by Axis aircraft while on convoy escort 4 September 1940.
- Boxing match on the forecastle of HMAS Stuart at Alexandria Harbour.
- At sea for exercises with HMS Liverpool and HMS Gloucester.
- Scene of HMAS Stuart's mascot, monkey Chico with HMS Jervis's monkey and HMS Dainty berthed alongside.
- At sea with HMAS Sydney to bombard Bardia on the way back to Alexandria.
- At sea with battle fleet preceding to bombard Rhodes. Fairey Swordfish from the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious circling overhead.
- At sea en route Malta on 29 September 1940 SOS distress signal from one of HMS Illustrious's aircraft which had crashed after downing an Italian reconnaissance aircraft. Scenes of rescue of the two aircrew.
- Fairey Fulmars from HMS Illustrious pass over the ship.
- During the night HMAS Stuart established contact with enemy submarine and dropped depth charges. HMAS Stuart was assisted by Short Sunderland flying boat of 230 Sqn RAF which bombed the submarine. HMAS Stuart fired on the submarine thus marked by the bomb explosions with 4.7 inch guns. Italian submarine was the Gondar which sunk after being abandoned because of damage sustained in the action.
- Scenes of Sollum, Bardia, Tobruk and Benghazi.
- The film ends at the wharf in Benghazi the day after it was captured. Petty Officer Carey's brother-in-law Sapper Don Scully of the 2/8 Field Company RAE and four other Sappers came down to the jetty when they had seen HMAS Stuart entering the harbour.
- (Adapted from Petty Officer Carey's diary entries)

- Thanks for your attention.