

# Australia's War: 80 years ago this week

## 14 April 1941



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FORECAST: Local showers. Map, Page 12.



No. 2375

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BRISBANE, TUESDAY, APRIL 15, 1941.

# The Courier-Mail

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16 PAGES—2d

## THREAT TO SUEZ CAUSES ANXIETY

### Germans Claim Sollum Taken

GERMANY'S swift drive from Libya into Egypt has given rise to grave anxiety in Britain. "The German advance is outpacing our defence," declares the Manchester Guardian.

The German advance opens the Suez Canal to an ominous threat, says the New York Times. Britain must gather her naval and military power to meet it.

The German High Command claims the capture of Sollum and Fort Capuzzo.

Fighting had been going on at Sollum, a small port in Egypt near the Cyrenaican border, between Imperial troops and enemy mechanised units far in advance of their main columns. Bardia, which had been evacuated by Imperial forces, was occupied by the enemy on Saturday after a detour round Tobruk.

British troops at Tobruk—75 miles west of Sollum—were not surrounded or isolated, as claimed by the enemy, but it was still possible to make contact with them across the desert, states a London message.

Small supplies of petrol and other necessities, being dropped from the air, helped successful attacks in the last week. The German advance units, 45 tanks, Royal Cavalry, and other units, are in the desert and are reported to have been fairly well supplied.

Many British troops are becoming available daily for service in the Western Desert, and the manpower situation is considerably better than it was a week ago.

### Grave Press View

Swelling of the seriousness of the German drive in the West, the Manchester Guardian editorial says: "It is not im-



THE NAZI HIGH COMMAND has claimed the capture of Sollum and Fort Capuzzo. The German advance units, 45 tanks, Royal Cavalry, and other units, are in the desert and are reported to have been fairly well supplied.

### Man Stabbed In City Street Fight

Several people saw a man stabbed three times with a butcher's knife in a fight at the corner of Upper Edward and Northbank streets, Spring Hill, last night.

## RUSSO-JAPANESE PACT SEEN AS THREAT IN PACIFIC

THE new Russo-Japanese neutrality pact is regarded in Washington as a potential threat to Democratic interests in the Pacific.

London official comment is guarded. It minimises the importance of the pact and suggests that Japan has not gained much.

Japan is making the most of the publicity value of the pact. The official Japanese News of the day, however, is more guarded. It says the pact is a "neutral" pact, and that it is not a "non-aggression" pact. It also says that the pact is a "neutral" pact, and that it is not a "non-aggression" pact.

## CHECKS TO GERMAN BALKANS DRIVE

### British Repulse Crack Division

THE German military machine, after its first swift drive through the Balkans, has stumbled to a halt in northern Greece, and has met with checks in the mountains of Yugoslavia.

British forces in Northern Greece, it was revealed last night, hurled back a crack German division of storm troops—the Adolf Hitler Division—on Friday. Heavy losses were inflicted on the Germans.

The Greeks have been encouraged by the arrival of further contingents of British Imperial Forces. The Germans continue to test the strength of the Allied line in Greece, and many attacks have been repulsed with heavy losses.

Yugoslav troops have entered the Albanian port of Durazzo, and the German advance has been checked. The Greeks have been encouraged by the arrival of further contingents of British Imperial Forces.

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### Nazi Tanks Driven Back

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### "Homeric Hughes" Praised In U.S.

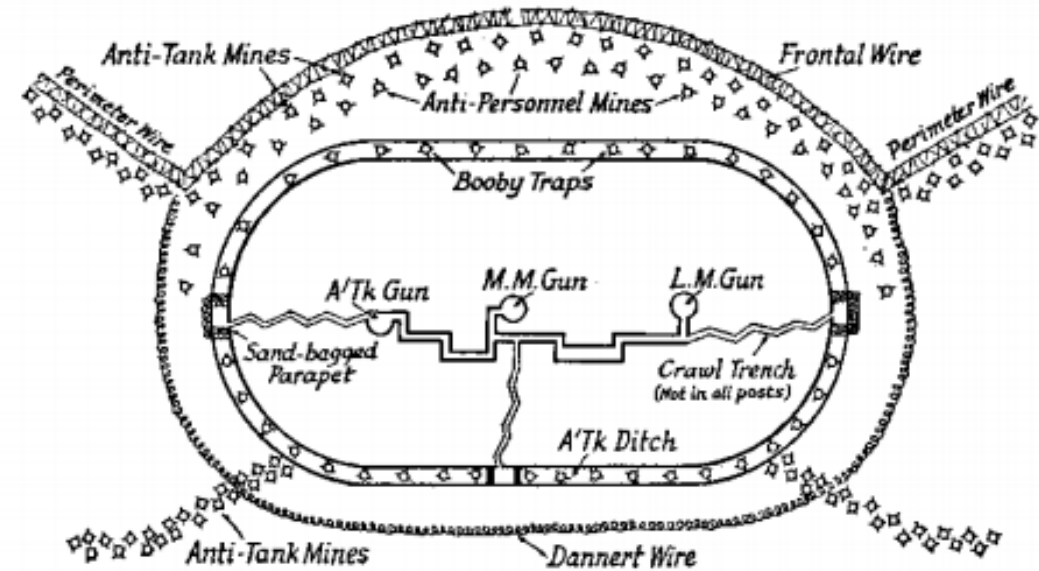
THE NEW YORK TIMES has praised the courage and leadership of the British forces in the Western Desert. It says that the British forces have been "driven back" by the German advance.

### Man Stabbed In City Street Fight

Several people saw a man stabbed three times with a butcher's knife in a fight at the corner of Upper Edward and Northbank streets, Spring Hill, last night.

# 14 April 1941 - Libya

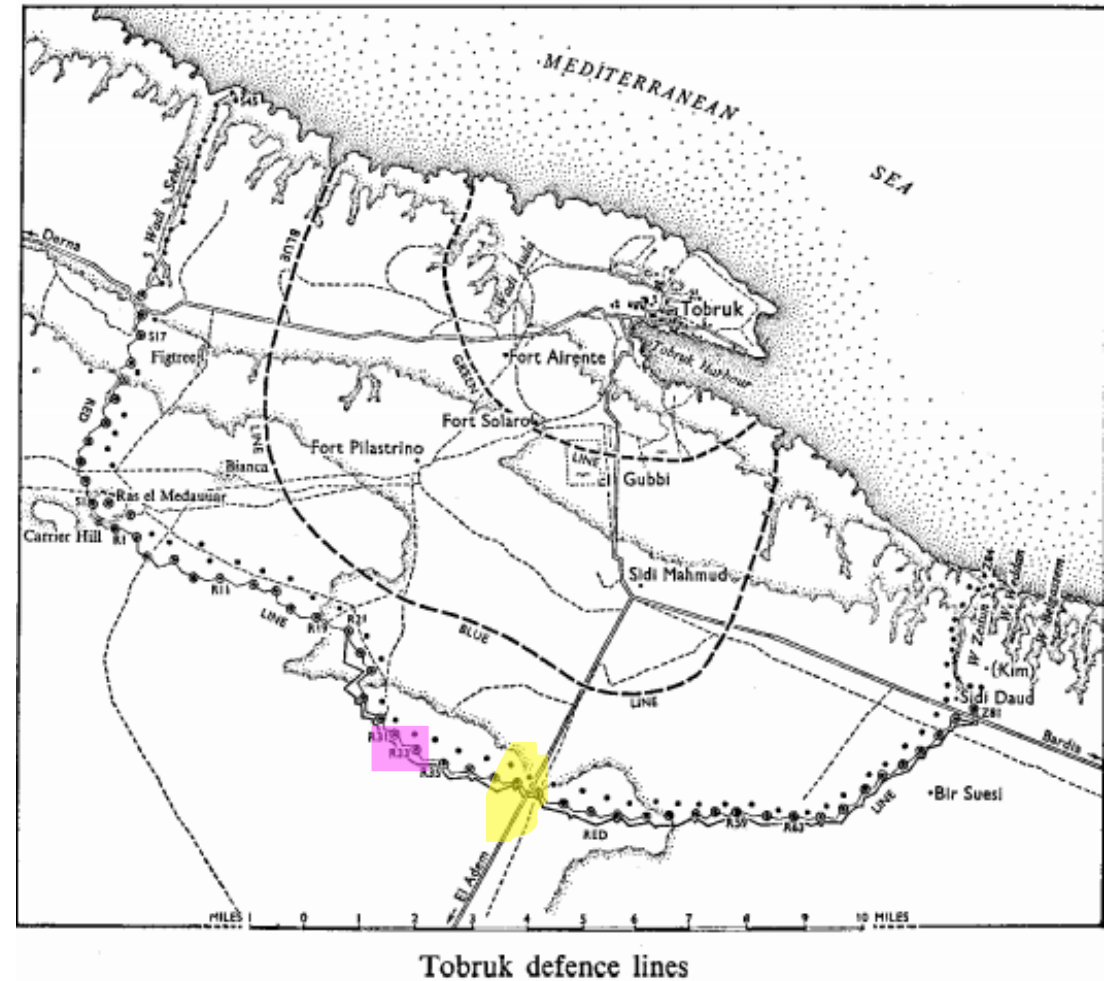
- Except at the perimeter's eastern and western extremities, where the wire descended the escarpments to link with the cliff walls of the Wadi Sehel and Wadi Zeitun (these wadis were deep chasms eroded out of solid rock), the perimeter defences traversed a plateau some 400 to 500 feet above sea-level. Beyond them the terrain was ridged to the west and south-west, but almost flat to the south and south-east.
- The Italians had surrounded almost the entire perimeter with an excellent "box " wire obstacle; where this had not been completed, concertina wire had been employed. Outside the wire a deep anti-tank ditch, designed to link with the wadis near the coast, had been partly excavated but not completed.
- In the apex of each "dog-leg" in the perimeter wire, was sited a perimeter post. These frontal posts were spaced at intervals of about 750 yards; about 500 yards behind them, covering the gaps between each two, was a second row of posts.
- The perimeter wire was purely frontal, not extending round the posts. Much of it had fallen into disrepair; some had been removed. The anti-tank ditch had been completed for only about one-fifth of the perimeter south of the coast road. Most of the uncompleted parts were covered by a comparatively ineffective belt of concertina wire.
- A thin line of anti-tank and anti-personnel mines had been laid in front of the wire, but many of these had been removed since the Italian occupation.
- Distrusting the Italian strongpoints because they provided so few fire-bays and enabled men to shelter without fighting, Morshead ordered the immediate construction of additional weapon-pits, with intercommunication trenches.



A typical perimeter post contained three concrete circular weapon-pits sited at ground level and interconnected by concreted subterranean passages, which led also to bomb-proof subterranean living and storage quarters. But the protection thus afforded was in large part illusory, for while a post might shelter many, few could fight from its three weapon-pits.

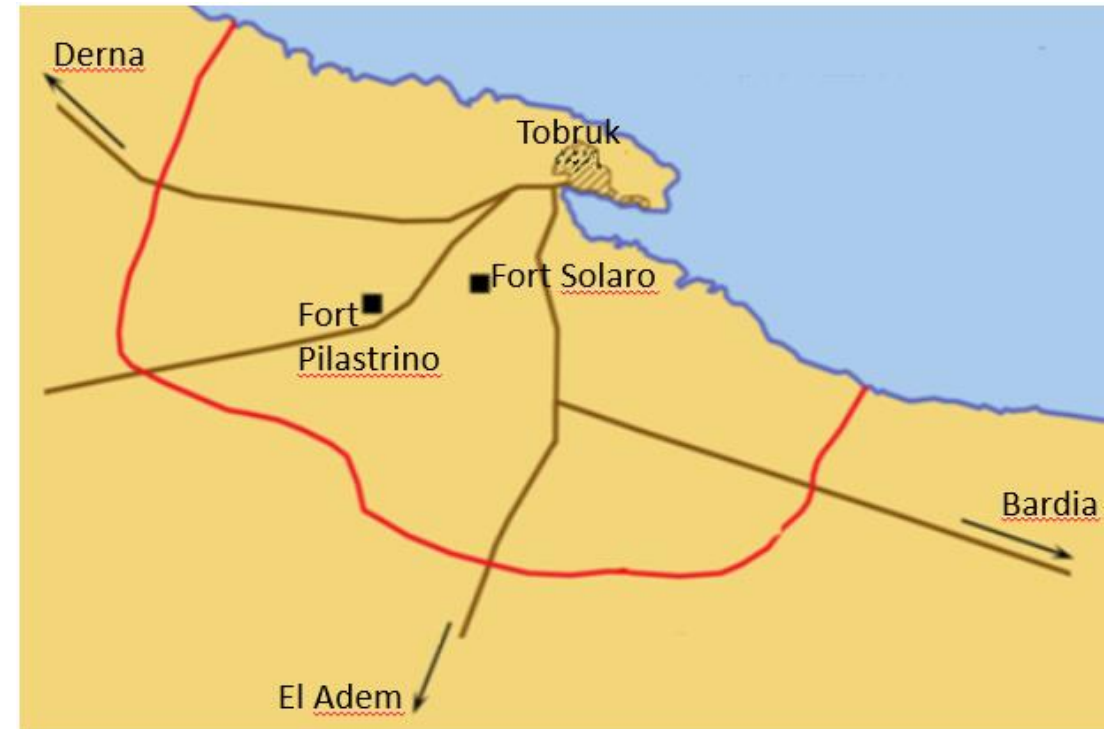
# 14 April 1941 - Libya

- Mines lifted by the Germans had been neatly stacked on either side of the intended gap, but the ditch—shallow though it was—was still unbreached. At half an hour past midnight a German tank approached, inspected it at this point and retired.
- At 2.30 a.m. about 200 infantry broke through the wire near R33 and fanned out for several hundred yards inside.
- Balfe called for artillery fire by Very light signal. The 1st and 107th R.H.A. put down a heavy bombardment and the infantry in the posts joined in with their small arms.
- Ambulances began moving about outside the wire, but the enemy remained inside the perimeter.
- Lt-Col Crawford now asked Murray for assistance and Captain Peek's company of the 2/15th was sent to Crawford, who arranged for it to go into position in rear of Balfe's company.
- Towards 4 a.m. enemy tanks were seen in the moonlight assembling not far from the wire near the El Adem Road and were shelled, but without observed effect. About 4.45 a.m. they approached the perimeter at R41 near the El Adem Road.



# 14 April 1941 - Libya

- At 4.50 a.m. some 40 tanks were reported moving west from R41 along the perimeter just outside the wire. One light tank was stopped by fire from a 2/13th Battalion post. Enemy guns began to bombard the garrison defences largely with air-burst shells.
- The tanks continued to skirt the perimeter and the Chestnut Troop of the 1st R.H.A. engaged them. At 5.20 a.m. the first tanks turned and entered the perimeter through the gap near Mackell's post and made straight for Balfe's headquarters.
- There were 15 in the first wave, some of them towing anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns.
- Morshead's instructions for the defence in a tank attack were to avoid attracting the tanks' attention but to engage the following infantry when the tanks had passed.
- The tanks passed by the front perimeter posts and assembled almost on top of Balfe's headquarters in R32; 15 to 20 men followed each tank or rode on it, but dropped behind once they were within the perimeter.
- The British artillery defensive fire had been falling in front of the wire; the range was now shortened and fire was brought down right on Balfe's headquarters, with excellent effect.



The machine-gun crews who had been riding on the tanks were mostly killed or wounded; the tanks moved on without them, while the accompanying infantry scattered and moved back towards the wire and, for the most part disorganised, were engaged from the posts.

# 14 April 1941 - Libya

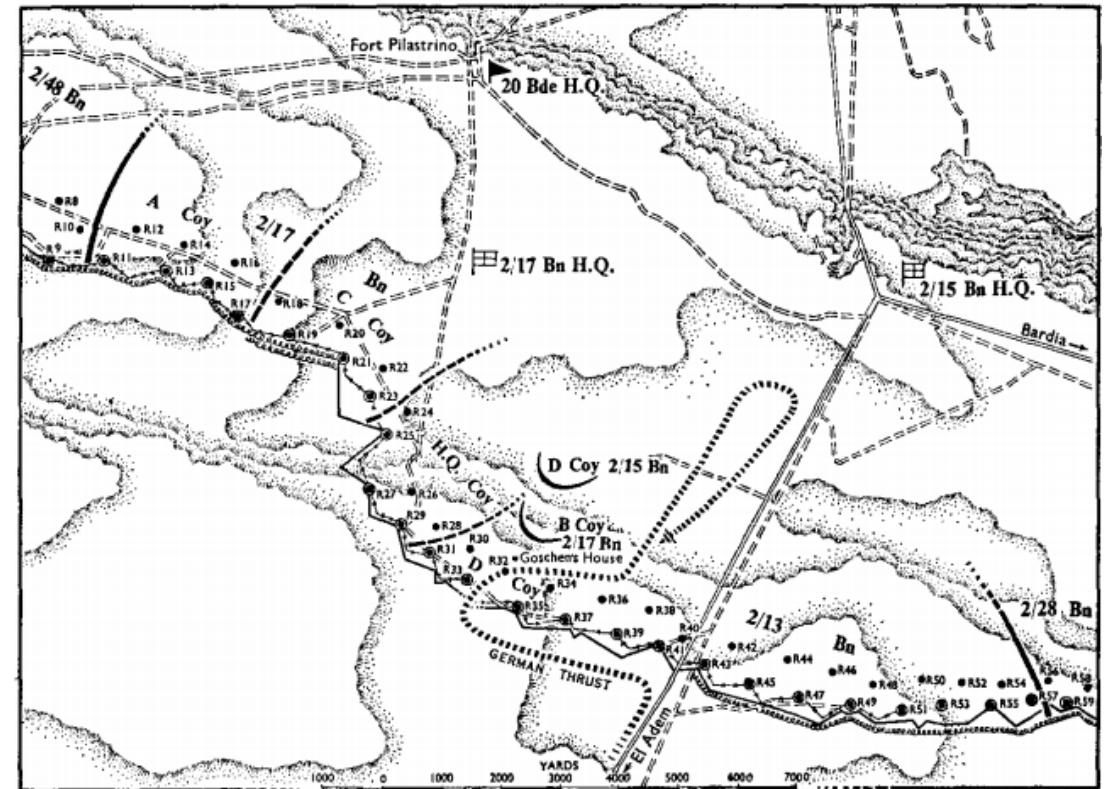
- One strong group of German infantry established itself in some sangars and a ruined house behind Balfe's headquarters, previously occupied by Major Goschen of the 1st R.H.A..
- The tanks moved back eastwards on the Tobruk side of the wire until they were within a mile of the El Adem Road. Then they turned northeast, moved for a short time parallel to the road, and, facing northwards, halted to await the dawn about a mile and a half from "A/E" Battery of the 1st R.H.A. Tracers from their machine-guns told the R.H.A. where the tanks were. The gunners allowed them no peace.
- On the perimeter, in the meantime, the forward posts kept the perimeter gaps under steady fire, blocking the follow-up of unarmoured reinforcements, while the weapons in the second-line posts, covering the ground between, prevented the enemy from recovering the cohesion lost when the first artillery concentrations had fallen among them.
- As dawn came, the fire fight increased in intensity. Near Balfe's headquarters, three German anti-tank guns and a small field-piece were brought into action, firing behind the post. Balfe's men engaged the crews with rifle fire; the enemy in reply turned their guns onto the post; but the Australians continued to snipe the gun crews until all were killed (Lieutenant Geikie shot four by aimed fire).
- Next the Germans brought up to the gap a 75-mm field-piece and some huge, long-barrelled guns; but the infantry in the posts dealt with their crews in the same manner. As the light increased, the location of enemy machine-guns within the perimeter was revealed. They were engaged and one by one subdued.
- As soon as the location of the intruding force was established, Morshead ordered the two cruiser squadrons of the 1st R.T.R. to engage the enemy tanks at first light.

# 14 April 1941 - Libya

- As visibility improved the British cruisers crossed the El Adem Road and the enemy tanks could be seen in a huddle one and a half miles to the south of the guns of "A/E" Battery, which brought down concentrated fire upon them.
- The German tanks spread out and began to work forward in groups towards the gap between the battery's two troops.
- One troop of "M" Battery 3rd R.H.A. was fighting a spirited action with its five guns on portee in the open. The troop worked round to the rear of the tanks, came up on the right flank and engaged them in a running fight, using mosquito tactics and accounting for several, but leaving two of their own guns and their portees destroyed.
- Fired at on all sides, the tanks, which had at first advanced well dispersed, tended to bunch, but continued to fight their way forward by bounds. One group would stop to fire their guns, while another moved on through them. The whole body of tanks thus advanced relentlessly on the guns of the Chestnut Troop of the 1st R.H.A.
- The British gunners had no armour-piercing shell but their fire was effective. The foremost tanks came within 600 yards of the gun positions. At that range the 25-pounders were deadly and the gunners firing over open sights, did not relent when casualties mounted fast. In no time, five tanks were burning and one Mark IV tank had its turret blown clean off. Two veered to the right to work their way round the flank only to be engaged and checked by some anti-tank guns of the 2/3rd.
- The German tanks turned round and retreated but ran straight into the follow up battalion. There was confusion and several collisions.

# 14 April 1941 - Libya

- The assault had been turned. "A/E" Battery must get the main credit. For 45 minutes they had stood to their guns and contested the seemingly relentless enemy advance; the German tank crews were first to quail.
- The battery had one gun knocked out. In the Chestnut Troop 5 men were killed, and 3 wounded, including both the officers at the guns. "E" Troop's casualties were 6 killed or badly wounded, of whom only one survived.
- The German tanks next turned eastwards, but ran into the fire from a section of guns of the 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment while "B/O" Battery also engaged them with 25-pounders.
- Two guns of the 2/3rd under Sergeant Hinds\* caught them in enfilade while the R.H.A. engaged them frontally. Both anti-tank guns opened fire simultaneously. A medium German tank was stopped. One of the antitank guns was put out of action and the gunner, Scholfield\*, killed.
- Hinds continued firing the other. When the tanks had passed on and the smoke and dust had cleared, there were four enemy tanks knocked out in front of Hinds' gun. The Rocket Troop, in a close duel, had three guns knocked out, two tractors destroyed and many men killed.



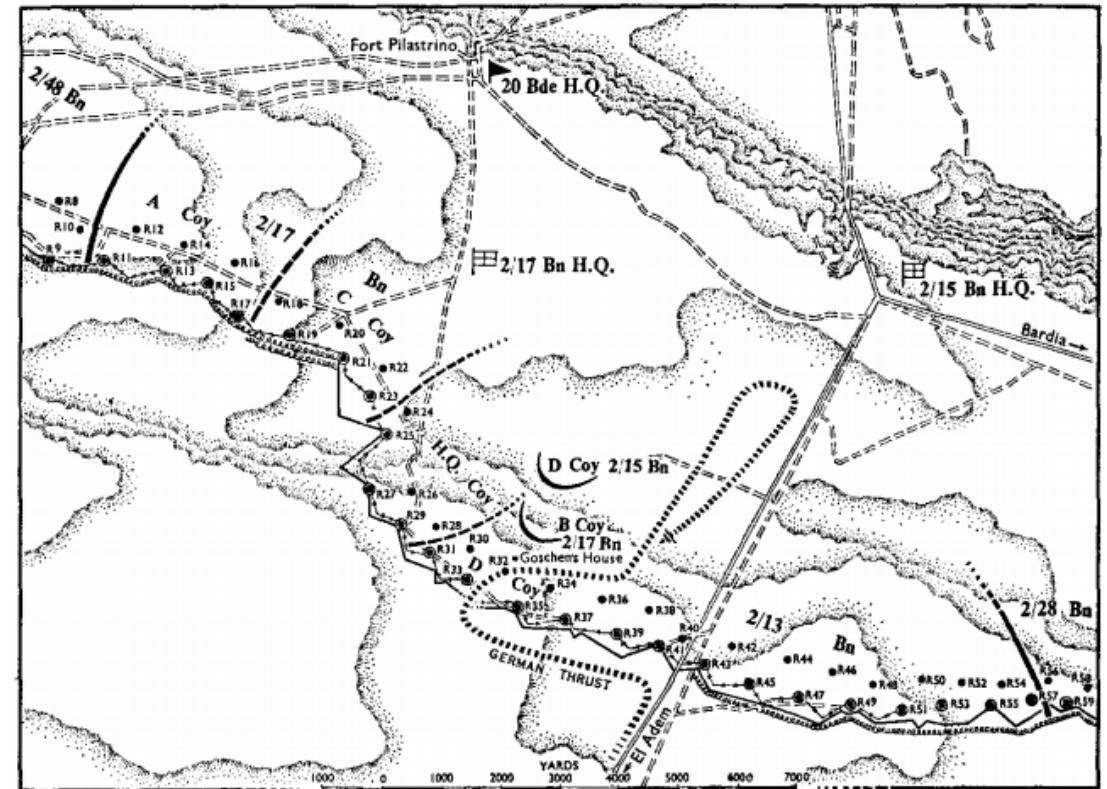
The German attack of 13th-14th April

Sgt D. Hinds, NX58477; 2/3 A-Tk Regt. Labourer; of Dulwich Hill, NSW; b. Sydney, 30 Nov 1919. Killed in action 21 May 1941.

Gnr J. W. Scholfield, NX32909; 2/3 A-Tk Regt. Wharf casual; of Glebe, NSW; b. Sydney 19 Dec 1914. Killed in action 14 Apr 1941.

# 14 April 1941 - Libya

- The cruisers of the 1st Royal Tanks had taken up position to the east of the El Adem Road and opened fire at a range of about one mile and began to close in.
- Over the whole area of the break-in the battle was now being fought with great intensity, with weapons of every calibre from rapid light automatics to field guns. Drifting smoke and dust, billowing up, showed where the ground fighting was severest.
- Near the perimeter gap a counter-attack was being made on the enemy in Goschen's house. Beside the El Adem Road German tanks were being engaged simultaneously by "B/O" Battery, the 2/3rd's anti-tank guns and the cruiser tanks.
- On the perimeter the German infantry were taking whatever cover they could find. Two sections, led by Sergeant McElroy\*, approached Goschen's house under covering fire from other sections. The Germans in the house, feigning to be Australians, answered a call from Sergeant Brady, but shot him as he approached. McElroy's men charged from dead ground 50 yards in front, hurling grenades as they went. Some Germans rushed out surrendering; others did not and were dispatched with the bayonet. Eighteen were captured, eighteen killed; a few escaped.

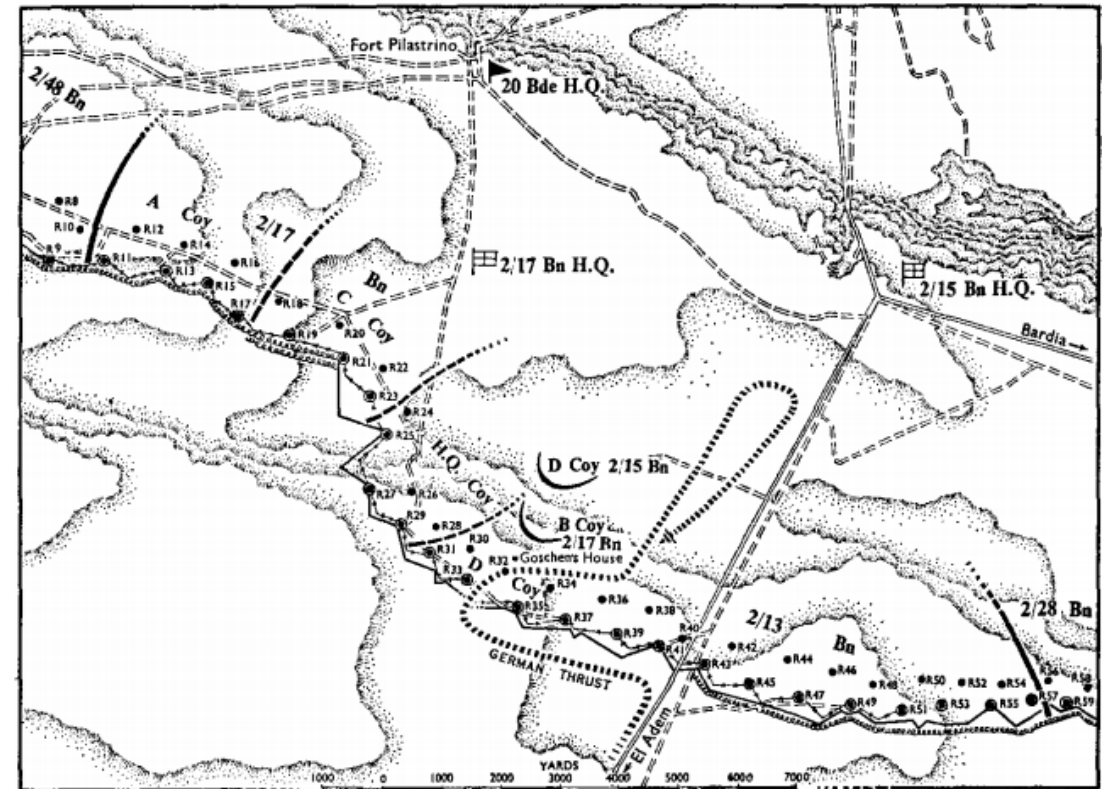


The German attack of 13th-14th April

\*Lt R. McL. McElroy, MM, NX23052; 2/17 Bn. Bank clerk; of Neutral Bay, NSW; b. Picton, NSW, 20 Mar 1920. Killed in action 27 Oct 1942.

# 14 April 1941 - Libya

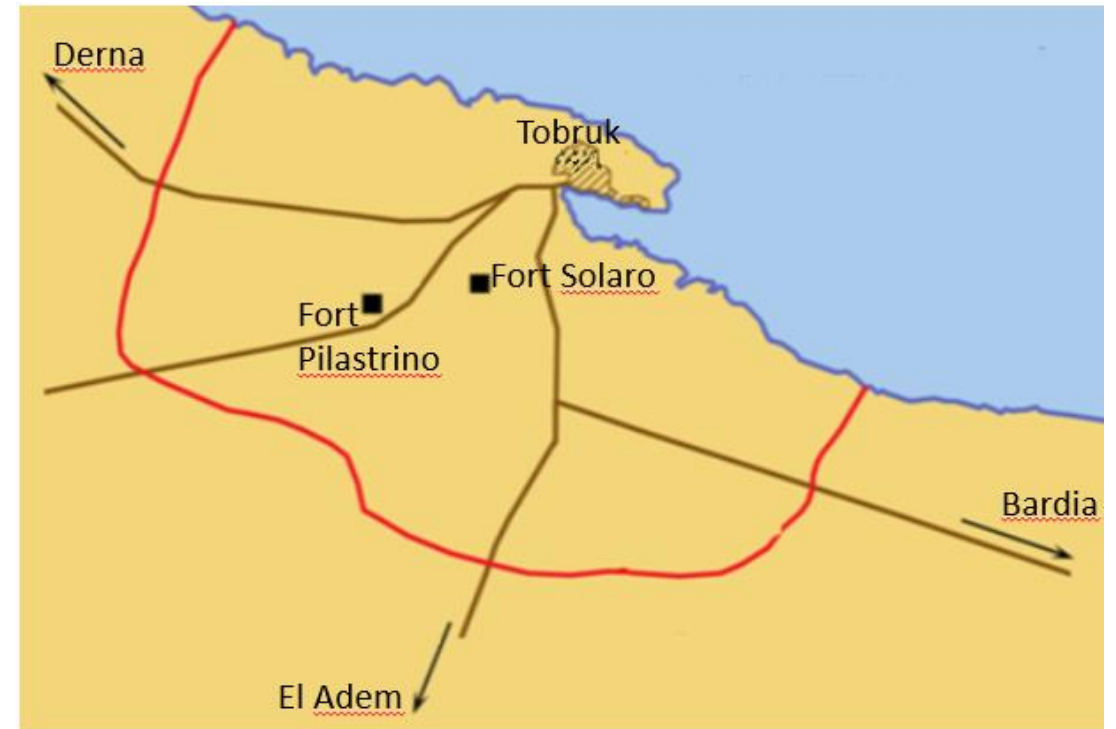
- Engaged on all sides the German tanks turned and made for the gap by which they had come, harassed still by "B/O" Battery and the 425th Battery.
- Now they encountered the mobile anti-tank guns of Lieutenant Hatch's troop of "J" Battery, 3rd R.H.A..
- Next the tanks came within range of some guns of the 9th Battery, 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment. The British cruisers were following behind the German tanks, and two infantry tanks, which had closed in on the gap, joined in the fray.
- There was much confusion as the tanks made their exit—tanks and infantry pushing through the gap together.
- Behind Goschen's house about 100 enemy had established themselves on a reverse slope; they continued to prove troublesome after the house had been cleared. Assisted by the containing action of Peek's company of the 2/15th, which was deployed behind, Wilson personally led a platoon from his over-worked company against this enemy group. It achieved complete success: a few Germans were killed, 75 were captured, the rest fled. The battle was over by 8.30 a.m..



The German attack of 13th-14th April

# 14 April 1941 - Libya

- The Germans' first major operation against the fortress had ended in complete defeat.
- 150 enemy dead were counted on the battlefield and 250 prisoners were taken. The garrison's casualties were 26 killed and 64 wounded.
- Seventeen enemy tanks were destroyed, two British cruisers knocked out.
- General Lavarack issued an order of the day congratulating all ranks of the garrison on their stern and determined resistance.
- Lavarack received at 2.30 p.m. a personal message from Wavell which told him that arrangements had been made for Cyrenaica Command to be merged into Western Desert Force and that on return to Egypt he would therefore resume command of the 7th Division. Wavell concluded his message: "Most grateful your invaluable services in stabilising situation in Cyrenaica."
- General Lavarack yielded command at Tobruk to General Morshead at 6 p.m. on 14th April.



# 14 April 1941 - Libya

- On 14th April, Arthur\* and Lieutenant Tennant (South African Air Force) after a sharp fight with three Me-110's sent two enemy machines diving steeply apparently out of control.
- \*Gp Capt W. S. Arthur, DSO, DFC, 565. 3 Sqn; comd 75 Sqn 1943, 2 OTU 1944, 81 Wing 1944-45, 78 Wing 1945. Student; of Yelarbon, Qld; b. Sydney, 7 Dec 1919.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

021809

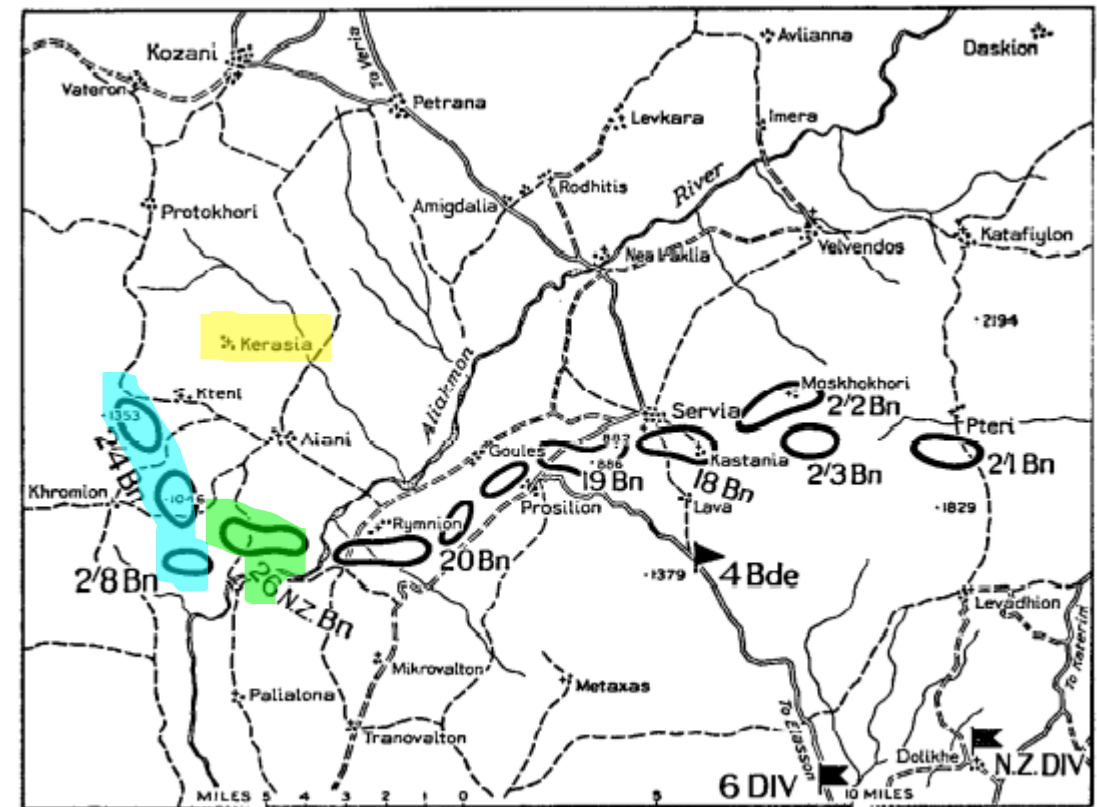
LIBYA. 1941-12. FLT-LNT ARTHUR, WITH THE NAZI FLAG PRESENTED TO NO. 3 SQUADRON, RAAF, BY GROUP-CAPTAIN CORSS, R.A.F., IN RECOGNITION OF THE SQUADRON'S TOTAL BAG OF MORE THAN 100 ENEMY PLANES. ON 11-30, THE SQUADRON SHOT DOWN 12 ENEMY FOR THE LOSS OF ONLY TWO OF ITS OWN MACHINES, ARTHUR SCORED FOUR OF THE "KILLS".

# 14 April 1941 – Greece NZ Div Cavalry

- At first light, 14 April, the Germans again moved forward. The artillery which had been brought across the river shelled C Squadron in the central sector and covered the infantry when they left their trucks and scrambled across the anti-tank ditch.
- The tanks concentrated along the coast, groping their way through the minefield and eventually encircling the ditch. No further delaying action being possible, the force withdrew through Katerini to the Mount Olympus area.
- The carriers of B Squadron were then withdrawn, leaving the armoured cars astride the road.
- By 5 p.m., when the artillery observers in the mountains were reporting the appearance of German vehicles along the road from Katerini, the armoured cars of B Squadron were through the lines of 5 Brigade and on their way over the pass to join the regiment in the Dholikhi area.

# 14 April 1941 - Greece

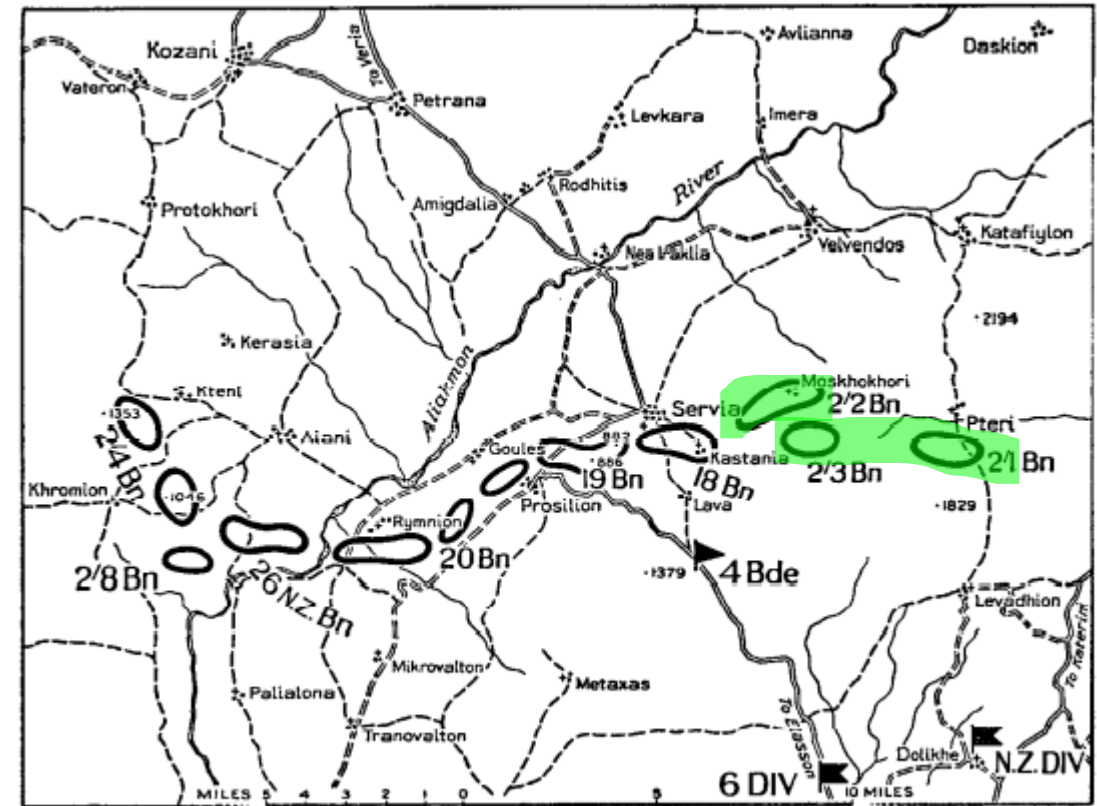
- The two weary and depleted battalions of the 19th Brigade had arrived in their new sector during the 13th.
- Trucks had carried them to the mountain village of Kerasia whence they marched into the hills.
- The arrival of batches of stragglers had now increased the strength of the 2/8th to 308, not including about fifty men whose vehicles took the wrong turning at Kozani and who were now south of the river.
- On the night of the 14th the 26th Battalion crossed the river by a ferry—a folding boat and a rope—and went into position on the Australian right facing north on a front of more than two miles. The boat could hold only three fully-equipped men, and one company was still on the south bank at daybreak and stayed there.
- The 2/4th Battalion was on the left facing east with one company on a 3,000-foot ridge on the right and another on a 4,000-foot mountain on the left overlooking Kteni at the boundary between the British and Greek forces, though no Greek troops were seen in that village by the Australians.
- The depleted 2/8th was in reserve.



Dispositions, 15th April.

# 14 April 1941 - Greece

- No bridge crossed the Aliakmon west of the main road, though the New Zealand ferry was kept in operation;
- but engineers had been ordered on the 13th to bridge the river on the 19th Brigade's flank.
- In the meantime even to send orders to the 19th Brigade was difficult because Vasey's wireless sets were not always effective;
- Captain Vial, one of Mackay's Intelligence officers, delivered a signal to him by riding his motor-cycle to the river, swimming the stream, and finding a Greek to guide him through the hills to the Australian headquarters.
- By the 15th April, all Blamey's corps was in position on the Olympus-Aliakmon line except the 16th Brigade, still moving into its sector on the right of the 4th.



Dispositions, 15th April.

# 14 April 1941 - Greece

- On the evening of the 14th when the British anti-tank battery supporting the Greeks at the **Siatista Pass** withdrew on Brigadier Charrington's orders, the Germans were within 200 yards of the guns, and the Greek infantry were dribbling back.
- That night Brigadier Charrington began to move the Armoured Brigade back from the Aliakmon to the Venetikos.
- Colonel Waller of the 102nd Anti-Tank Regiment, described the road as:
  - “packed with Greeks, Yugoslavs and British, military and civilians, motor, horse and ox transport, all intermingled, head to tail, and two lines deep wherever the road permitted it. An awful sight, made more dreadful by certainty that arrival of the Luftwaffe would not be long delayed . . . It was a clear, bright, sunny day and from about 0700 dive-bombing and machine-gunning attacks were continuous along the whole length of the road . It seemed that aircraft succeeded aircraft almost without a pause—yet we struggled forward and our loss was surprisingly slight . . . . By tremendous efforts we at last reached the river about 1700 hours—12 miles in 16 hours!



The front line on 15th April and the shorter line proposed by General Papagos.

# 14 April 1941 - London

- Menzies writes in his diary:
- At War Cabinet, W.C. speaks at length as the Master-Strategist—*“Tobruk must be held as a bridge-head or sally post, from which to hit the enemy”*. *“With what?”* says I, and so the discussion goes on. Wavell and the Admiralty have failed us. The Cabinet is deplorable—dumb men most of whom disagree with Winston but none of whom dare to say so. This state of affairs is most dangerous. The Chiefs of Staff are without exception Yes Men, and a politician runs the services. Winston is a dictator; he cannot be overruled, and his colleagues fear him. The people have set him up as something little less than God, and his power is therefore terrific.
- Today I decide to remain for a couple of weeks, for grave decisions will have to be taken about M.E. (*Middle East*), chiefly Australian forces, and I am not content to have them solved by *“unilateral rhetoric”*.

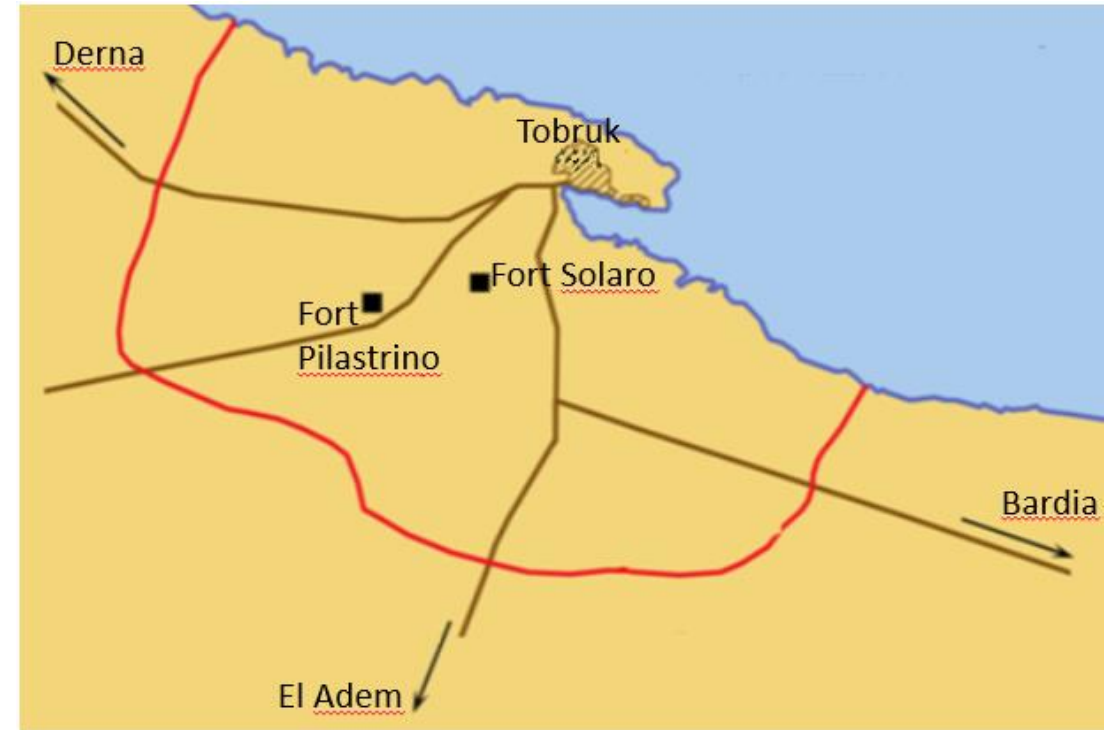


# 15 April 1941 - Egypt

- On the 15th, Wavell, Longmore, and Cunningham, at a conference in Warspite in Alexandria, decided that withdrawal was the only possible course.
- Assembly of the necessary naval units for Operation DEMON, as the withdrawal was designated, denuded the Western Desert Force and immobilised the battle fleet by depriving it of its destroyers. The operation was, as a result, carried out lacking heavy surface cover against the Italian Fleet.
- Naval forces used included six cruisers, twenty destroyers, four escort vessels, two of the "Glen" ships, and a number of powered lighters including six "A" lighters. Eight troopships took part in the actual embarkations at the beaches, and a ninth was lost on the way to her embarkation point. A further five were used in troop convoys from Crete to Egypt.

# 15 April 1941 - Libya

- Soon after dawn on the 15th, an enemy party appeared in the west just in front of the 2/48th and only about 150 yards from the wire. They were driven back by Bren gun fire.
- Throughout the morning group after group of infantry, each seeming larger than the last, approached the perimeter; each as it came into view through the dancing mirage, was halted by the guns of the 51st Field Regiment. All appeared to be Italian. By midday the front was quiet.
- Many of the enemy had sought refuge from the gunfire in a wadi on the escarpment some three-quarters of a mile from the perimeter and sent a patrol out to attack them. About 1,000 yards from the wire the patrol surprised an enemy party, threw grenades into their midst, charged with the bayonet and captured an Italian officer and 74 men.
- About 5.30 p.m. 1,000 Italian infantry advanced on the wire against the left company of the 2/24th and the right platoon of the 2/48th. Some of the enemy penetrated the wire on the front of the 2/24th Battalion and one post was overrun.
- Brigadier Tovell arranged with Lt-Col Evans to send his "A" Company of the 2/23rd to counter-attack. The 2/24th was regaining control of the situation by keeping those who had penetrated pinned to the ground by automatic fire.



The company of the 2/23rd on arrival counter-attacked the few still holding out. By 6.15 p.m. there were no enemy inside the wire, except 113 who had been captured.

# 15 April 1941 - Libya

- The following day (15th April) Jeffrey\* took off at noon to attack two Italian bombers reported over Sidi Azeiz, but failing to find them, turned on to the Bardia-Capuzzo road to strafe enemy vehicles.
- Suddenly he saw four Ju-52 aircraft flying south. A search having revealed no escort he turned quickly to attack but found the transport aircraft had meanwhile landed in considerable confusion, one alighting down-wind being rammed by a second approaching cross - wind.
- Only one was still airborne and this Jeffrey shot down and then strafed and set on fire the three on the ground.
- \*Gp Capt P. Jeffrey, DSO, DFC, 145 . Comd 3 Sqn 1940-41; W Ldr 234 Wing RAF 1941; comd RAAF Stn Bankstown, 75 and 76 Sqns 1942, 2 OTU 1942-43, 1 Wing 1943-44, 2 OUT 1944-45 . Regular air force offr; of Sydney; b. Tenterfield, NSW, 6 July 1913.
- Sergeant A. C. Cameron, left, and Wing Commander P. Jeffrey, of 3 Squadron RAAF. On 30 September 1941 Sgt Cameron was forced to land in the desert during an operational flight. WgCdr Jeffrey landed his Tomahawk aircraft in the desert at Sgt Cameron's location, discarded his parachute, and the two men flew back to base in the single seated cockpit. Sgt Cameron was the largest man in the squadron, affectionately known as 'Tiny'.



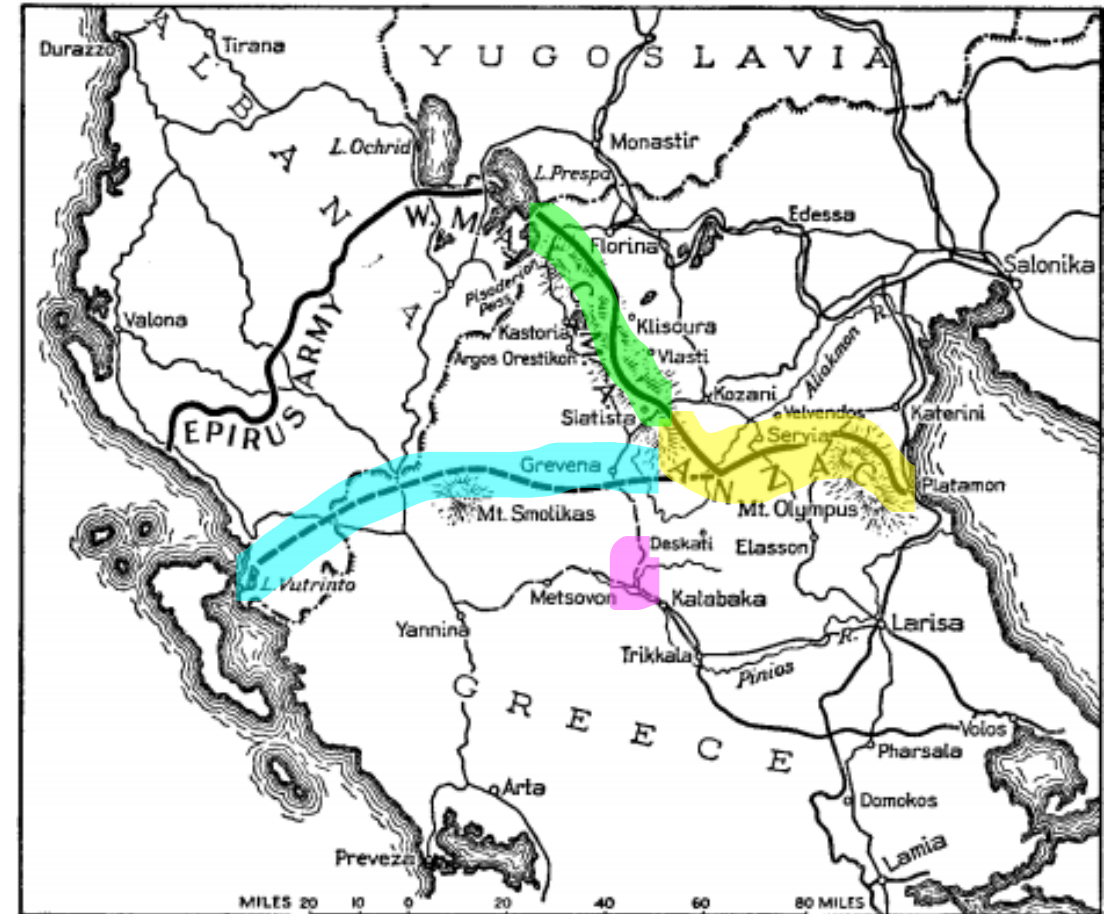
# 15 April 1941 - Greece

- On the 15th German squadrons made a dawn attack on the airfields in the Larisa area destroying ten Blenheims on the ground at Niamata.
- Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac, who was present when this calamity occurred, ordered that what remained of the squadrons should withdraw to Athens forthwith.
- German aircraft then bombed Larisa intermittently throughout the day and heavily bombed Elasson, where Blamey's headquarters were.
- Henceforward few British aircraft were to be seen, and German air attacks became daily more intense.



# 15 April 1941 - Greece

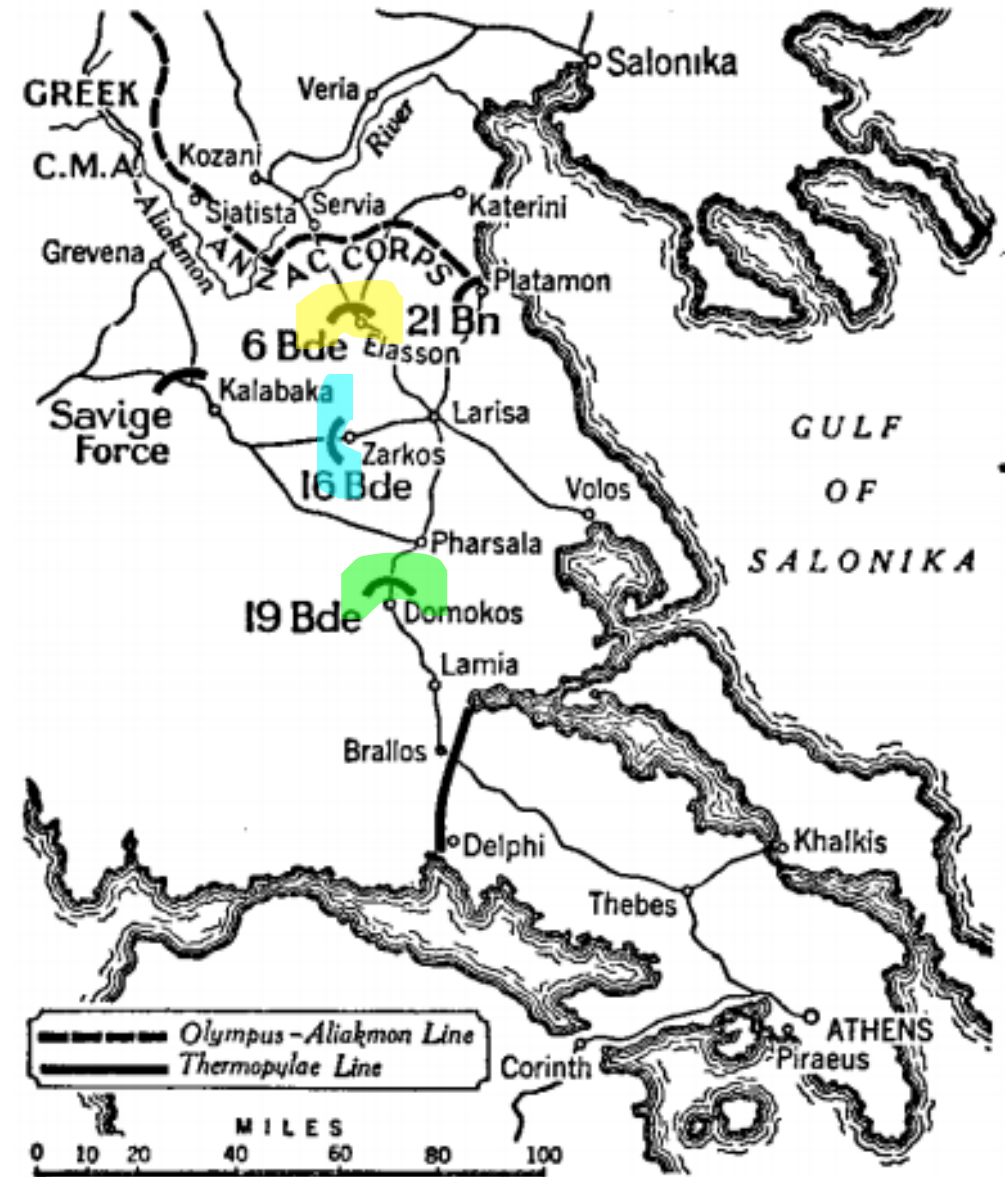
- The map shows the position on 15<sup>th</sup> April. The Anzacs had withdrawn to the Aliakmon line. The Greeks had withdrawn west onto the mountain line but now faced a longer withdrawal onto Papagos' proposed line.
- Wilson was very concerned about the Greek's ability to withdraw in good order and protect his left flank.
- Savage with the newly arrived 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade was ordered to hold the junction of the Pindus and Grevena roads and prepare to move north to support the armoured brigade, probably on the Venetikos River.
- Wilson's order for the retirement to Thermopylae was issued at 9.5 a.m. on the 15th.



The front line on 15th April and the shorter line proposed by General Papagos.

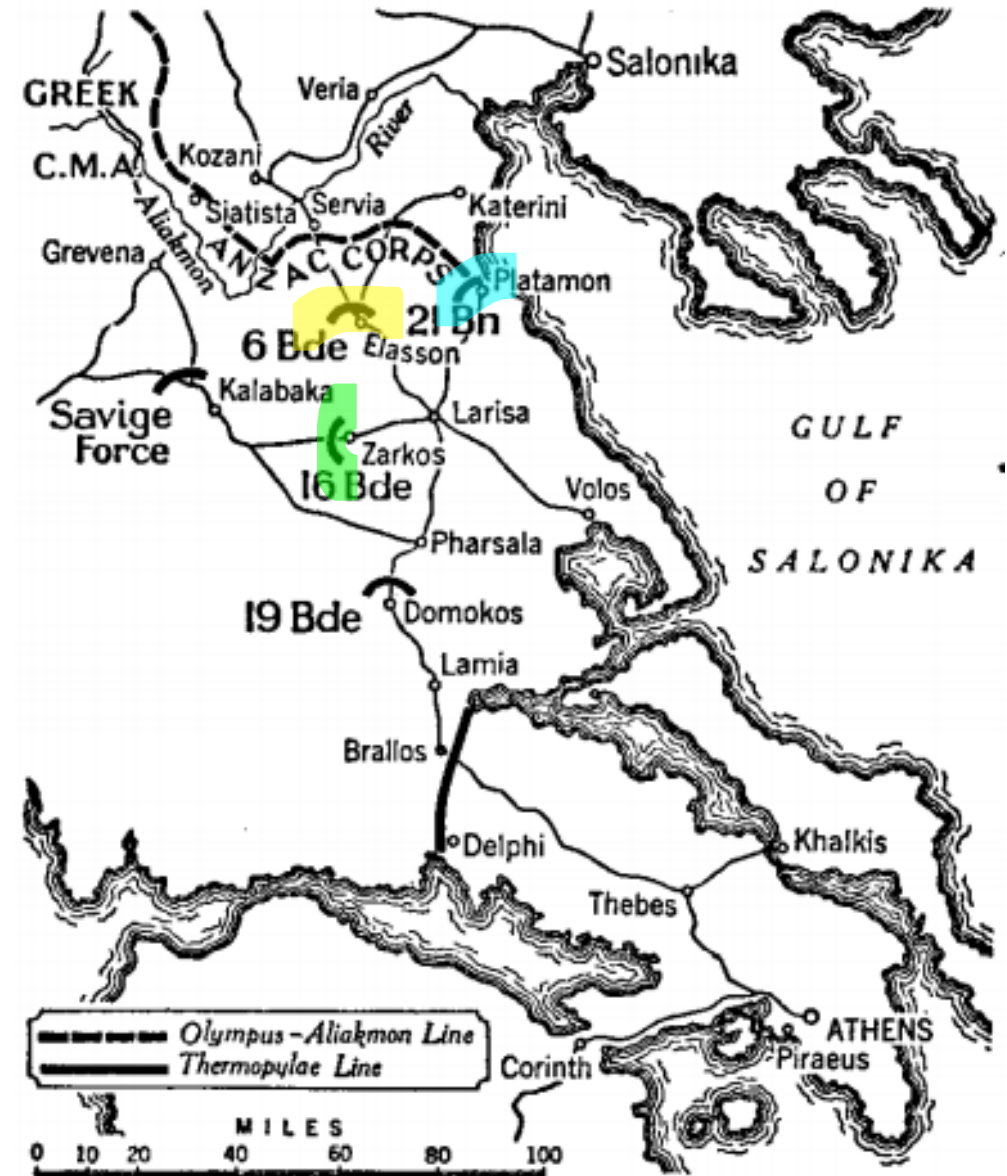
# 15 April 1941 - Greece

- At 6 p.m. on the 15<sup>th</sup> General Blamey issued orders for the withdrawal. There were to be two phases.
- The first would begin on the 15<sup>th</sup> (only six hours of which remained).
- During the night the **6th New Zealand Brigade** would move from its position in reserve in the Olympus Pass line covering the two roads between Tirnavos and Elasson, where it would be reinforced by the 2/3rd Australian Field Regiment.
- The **19th Australian Brigade**, after withdrawal from north of the Aliakmon, would move in vehicles to Domokos, south of Pharsala, where it would join a force commanded by Brigadier Lee and including the 2/6th and 2/7th Battalions, a company of the 2/5th, the 2/1st Field Regiment (less a battery), which would form a second rearguard to cover the final withdrawal to the new line.
- The **16th Brigade**—the left flank guard—would begin to move on 15<sup>th</sup> April on foot to the main road and thence in vehicles to a position astride the Trikkala-Larisa road at Zarkos with a field regiment in support.



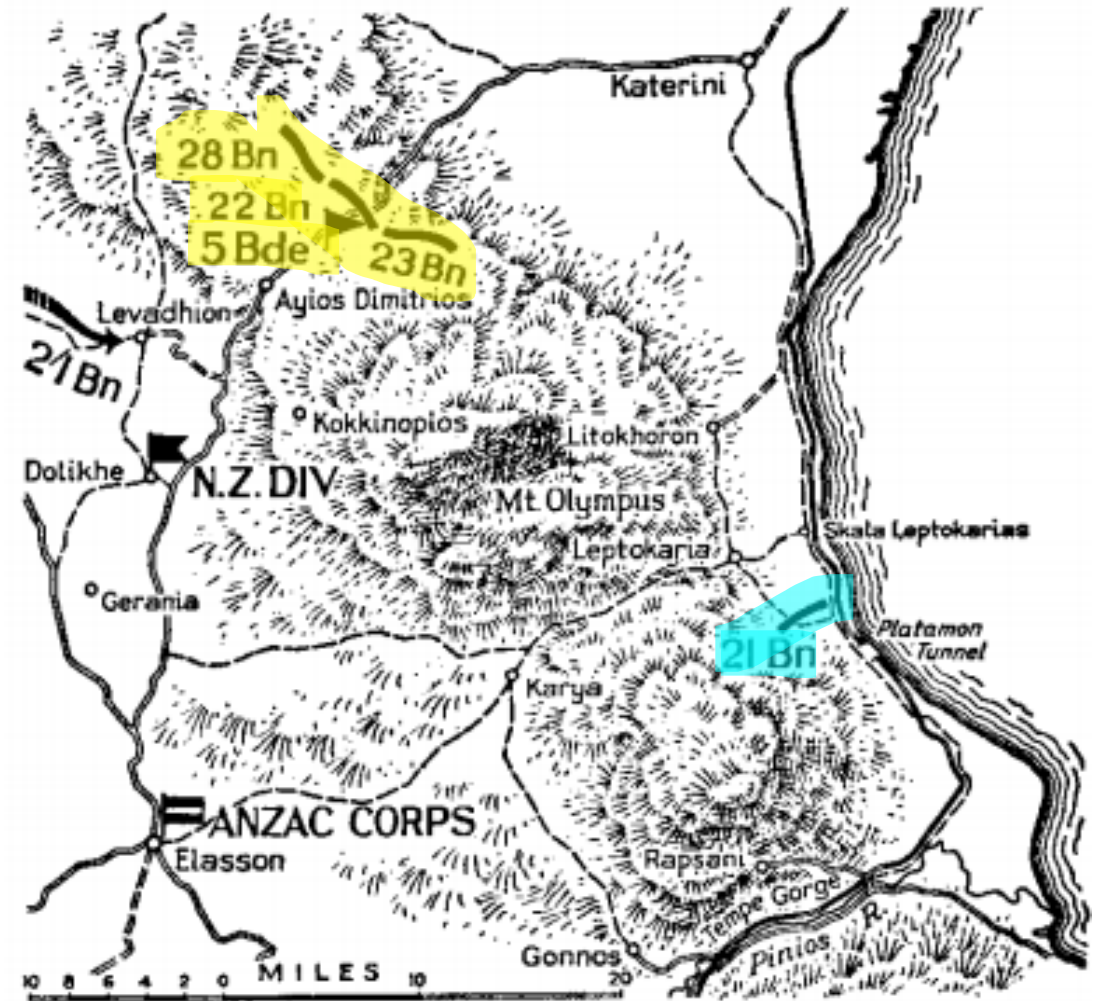
# 15 April 1941 - Greece

- In the second phase Freyberg would become responsible for the front and for the withdrawal through the first rearguard of his 5th Brigade Group from the Olympus Pass and his 4th Brigade Group from Servia on the night of the 17th-18th, "subject to ability to disengage";
- on the same night Savige Force was to withdraw through the left flank guard.
- "The rearguard of 6th New Zealand Brigade Group, the left flank guard of 16th Australian Brigade Group, and the troops holding the coast at pass east of Mount Olympus were to withdraw during the night 18th-19th April,
- 1st Armoured Brigade covering the final withdrawal across the flat, featureless plain of Thessaly on 19th April.



# 15 April 1941 - Greece

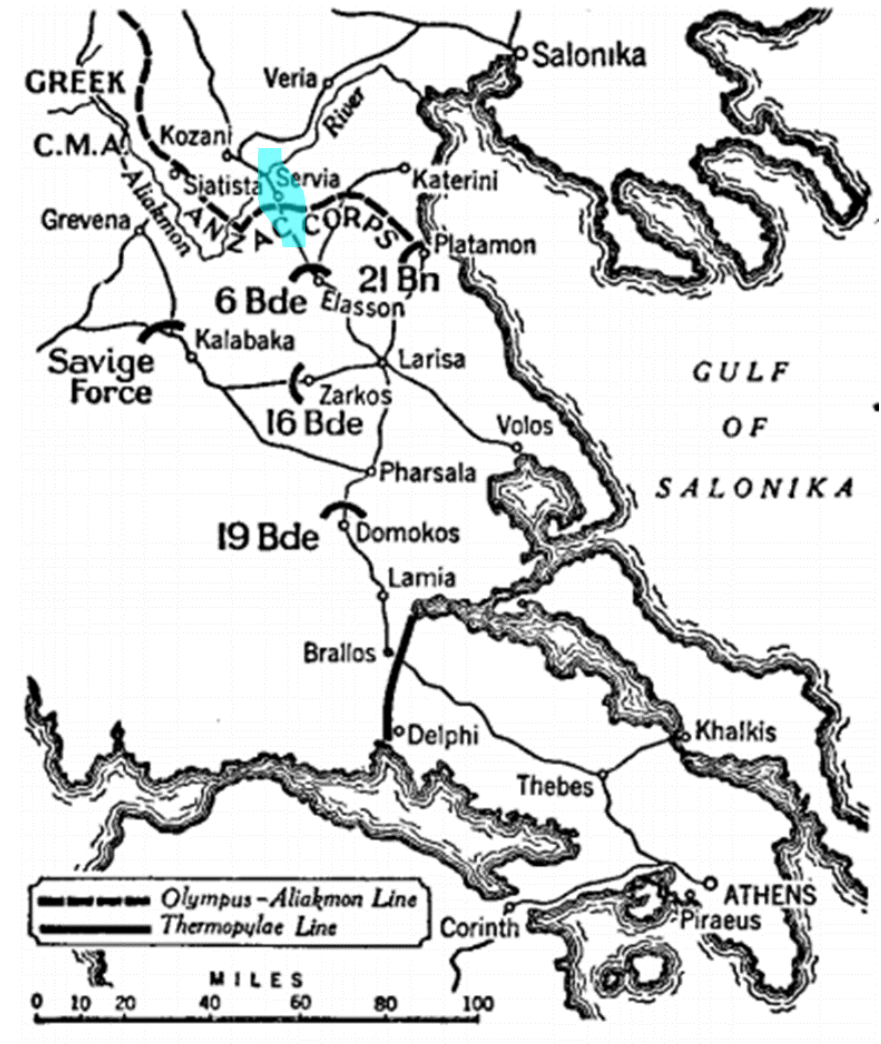
- The **5th New Zealand Brigade** was deployed across the Katerini-Elasson road in the Olympus Pass.
- During the 15th German tanks and vehicles cautiously advanced, evidently trying to find covered ways of approach and to move round the demolitions. They were fired on by the defending artillery, and about 4.30 p.m. German guns began to reply.
- No real attack developed during the day.
- The **21st Battalion** was attacked by motor-cycle troops during the 15th but repulsed the enemy with heavy loss.



Dawn, 15th April.

# 15 April 1941 - Greece

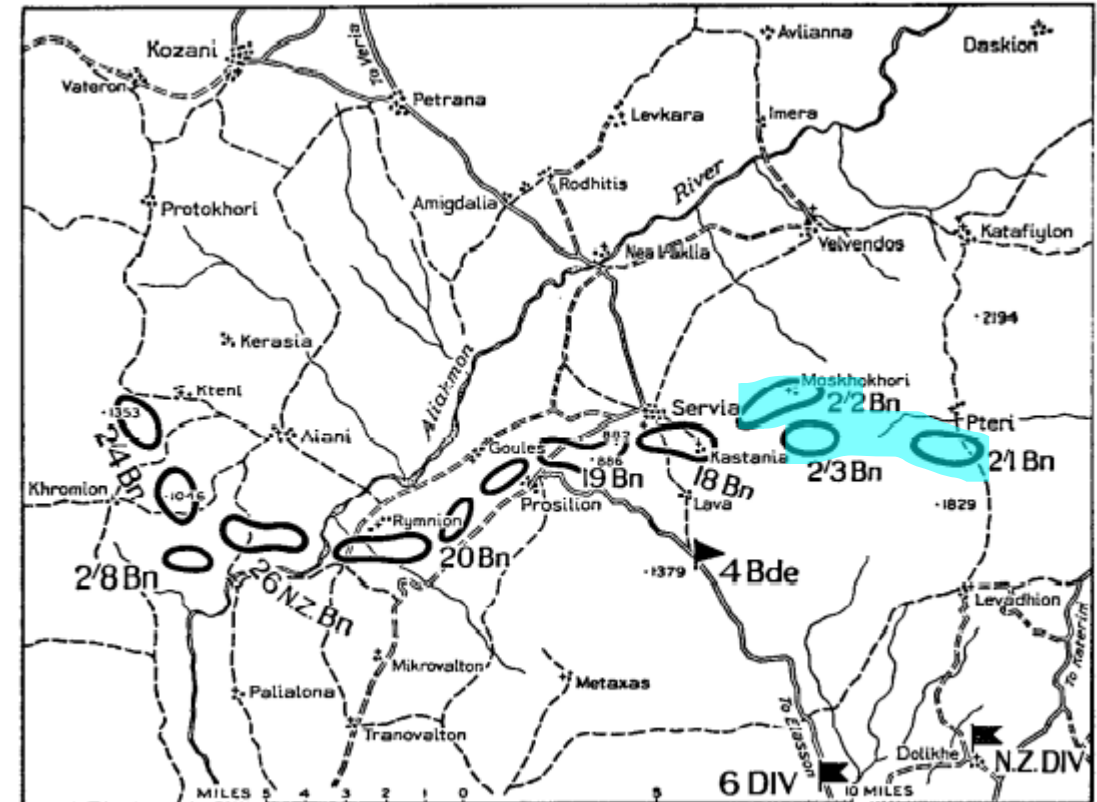
- An attack on Puttick's 4th Brigade defending the **Servia Pass** had begun.
- Before dawn on the 15<sup>th</sup> the men in the forward posts saw a party of Germans straggling along the road like Greeks, for whom they were at first mistaken.
- Some of them had passed the sections guarding the road before they were recognised and dispersed by fire from infantry and Lieutenant Sampson's platoon of the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion forward in the pass.
- Attacks at midday and another at 5.45 p.m. launched without air or artillery bombardment were easily repulsed. Germans ran for cover in the small bushes growing on the hillside but after machine - gunners and riflemen had lashed the area with fire they began to emerge waving white handkerchiefs.
- The New Zealanders sent forward patrols which rounded up 147 unwounded officers and men and from 30 to 40 wounded Austrian infantrymen of the 9th Armoured Division. The enemy's total losses were estimated at about 400. The New Zealanders suffered only eight casualties.
- Brigadier Puttick asked one of the prisoners why the attack had been made in so absurd a fashion, the Austrian replied that he was afraid "some of our officers are not good at tactics".



# 15 April 1941 - Greece

- The battalions of the **16th Australian Brigade** had only just completed their march from the previous line and reached their new positions at about 9 a.m. on the 15<sup>th</sup>. They were about 5,500 feet above sea level and two feet deep in snow. They had been climbing with little rest since the night of the 12<sup>th</sup>, and had only a greatcoat and one blanket each in which to sleep.
- It was difficult to convey the withdrawal orders to the 16th Brigade. There was not enough telephone wire to link them with Allen's headquarters and they could be reached only along tracks winding across the slopes of Olympus. Lieutenant Swinton of Allen's staff rode a pony to the 2/2nd, which was to come out first, with an order to hand over to the 2/3rd and march out to the southern end of the pass. He reached Chilton at 8 p.m. on the 15<sup>th</sup>. By 2 a.m. on the 16<sup>th</sup> the battalion had concentrated and was marching out.
- The 2/1st Battalion was in country so difficult and snow-bound that the brigade liaison officer could not even find it.

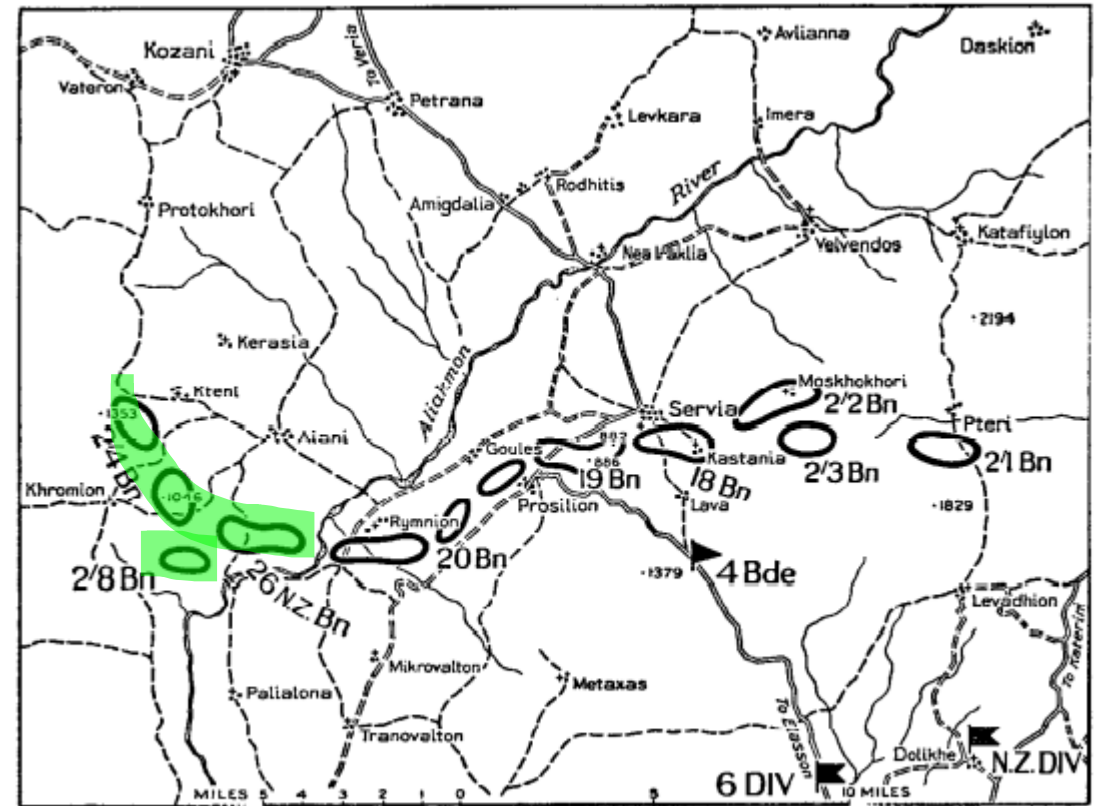
## Servia Pass



Dispositions, 15th April.

# 15 April 1941 - Greece

- Early in the afternoon of the 15th Blamey had instructed Mackay that he must move the 19th Brigade back across the Aliakmon that day. Only a few hours of daylight remained, the river was not yet bridged and wireless communication with Vasey was unreliable.
- Lieutenant Chester and a section of the 2/1st Field Company had been sent forward to build a timber trestle bridge. The men carried picks, shovels, and other hand tools, spikes and rope. These teams reached the river after dark on the 14th and began work at dawn next day. They laboured all day, helped in the afternoon by New Zealanders of the 26th Battalion and two sections of a company of British engineers, but were still cutting timber for the bridge when at 2 p.m. an order arrived that it must be ready for the 19th Brigade to cross at 9 p.m.



Dispositions, 15th April.

# 15 April 1941 - Greece

- At 10 p.m. the bridge was finished and decked with slats six inches apart—a notable achievement by a small body of sappers equipped only with such tools as they could carry to the river along rough tracks.
- By the time the final gap of 45 feet was being spanned the leading companies of the 19th Brigade were assembling in the darkness on the opposite bank .

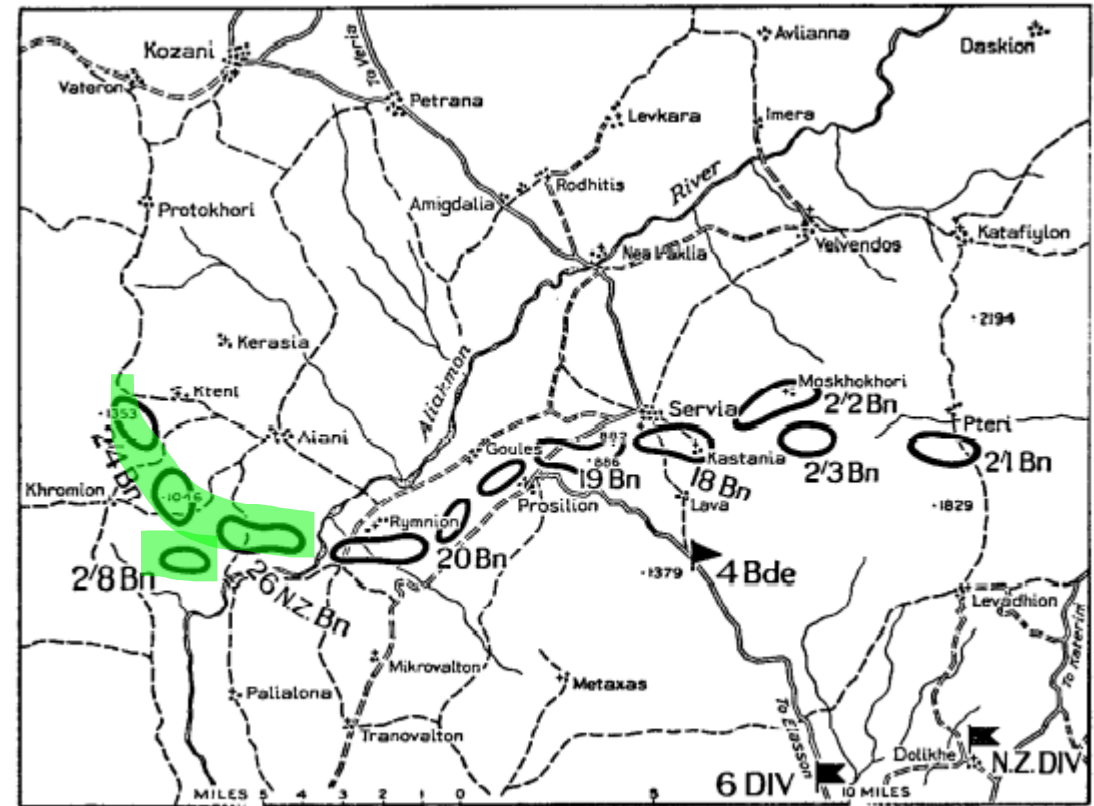


*(Unknown New Zealand sapper)*

The bridge built by the 2/1st Field Company to carry the 19th Brigade across the Aliakmon.

# 15 April 1941 - Greece

- The fifteen Bren carriers of the two battalions and the ten trucks' and guns of the anti-tank battery were driven down to the river blazing a trail for the infantry with their commander, Lt Maddern, leading the way with a hand torch; but when they arrived they found that the bridge could not carry vehicles.
- An attempt was made to raft a carrier across but the raft was overturned and swept away by the current. Consequently the crews smashed the engines of their vehicles with hammers and grenades, the gunners threw breech-blocks into the river, and guns and vehicles were abandoned.
- The company of the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion carried all twelve of their guns back across the river.
- The 2/8th and the 2/4th (without McCarty's company ) had crossed the bridge by 1 a.m. and, carrying some wounded men on improvised stretchers, began climbing a goat track leading up the steep escarpment to the Mikrovalton road.
- Chester and the New Zealand sergeant in charge of the ferry remained at the bridge and ferry until daylight, awaiting McCarty's missing company, but it did not arrive.



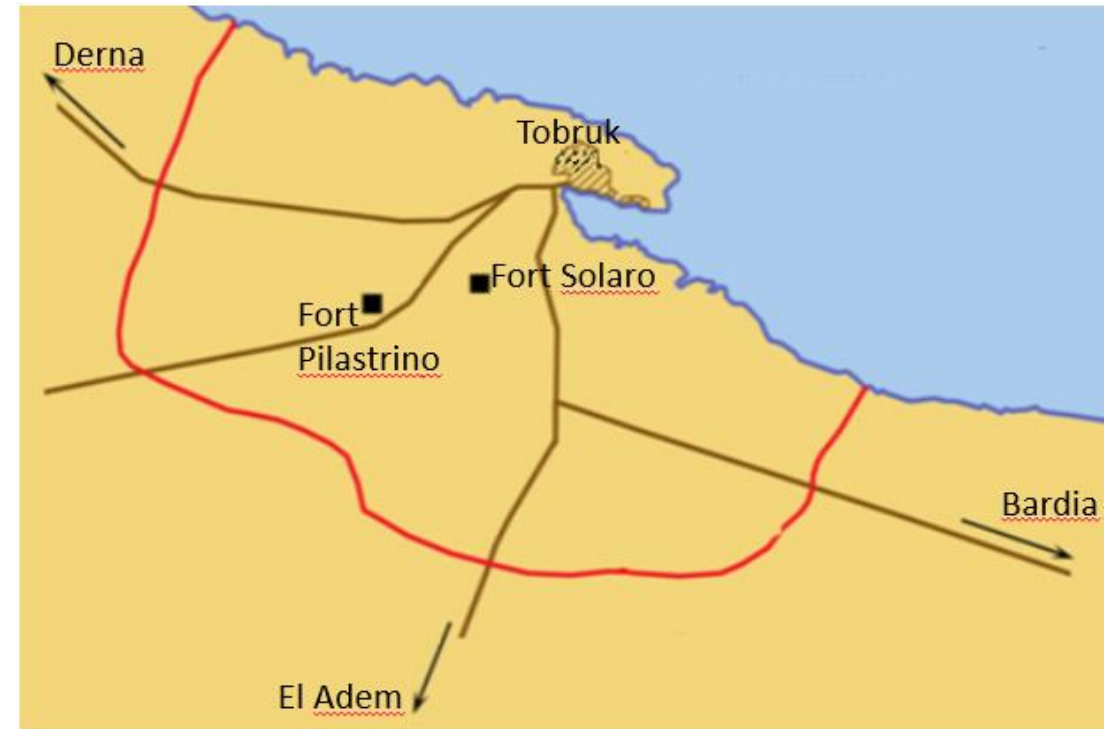
Dispositions, 15th April.

# 15 April 1941 - Greece

- On the 14th and 15th the 3rd Royal Tanks had to abandon seven tanks which broke down beyond repair, reducing the regiment to only six out of their original fifty-two, but the brigade was still strong in artillery, the fine 2nd Royal Horse Artillery being "as good as ever" and the 102nd Anti-Tank having lost only six guns.
- It was still a new and disturbing experience for New Zealand troops to watch the dive bombers approaching in formation, peeling off one by one, diving to about 1,000 feet to release their bombs and steeply climbing again. The Stukas sought out and attacked the gun positions, and dropped bombs along the road in an effort to crater it. Many of them had a screaming device fitted to them to make them more noisy and unpleasant for the troops below.
- On the 15th about 6 p.m. the head of the German column advancing through Klisoura had reached the Kastoria-Grevena road at Argos Orestikon cutting off the Greek Cavalry Division and the 9th, 10th and 13th Divisions, which began to withdraw westwards along the tracks leading into the Pindus mountains. What remained of the 12th and 20th Greek Divisions withdrew west across the Aliakmon to Neapolis and Grevena.

# 16 April 1941 - Libya

- Vigorous patrolling all round the perimeter on the 16<sup>th</sup> collected both prisoners and valuable material.
- A patrol under Lieutenant Wardle of the 2/48th, captured 97 Italian prisoners.
- Patrols from the 2/24<sup>th</sup> had also been out, one took 63 prisoners, another captured a Breda machine-gun and 8 prisoners.
- In the late evening an attack developed by an Italian infantry battalion supported by 12 tanks. Heavy shelling from the 51st Field Regiment made them scatter in disorder. Lt Isaksson was then sent out with a section of Bren gun carriers to work round the enemy's flank, an operation which was accomplished with remarkable success. The complete force was captured and herded like so many sheep through a gap in the wire back into the perimeter.



A squadron of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment with 12 infantry tanks arrived by sea on the 16th.

# 16 April 1941 - Mediterranean

- In the Battle of the Tarigo Convoy
  - The German cargo ships Adana (4,205 GRT, 1922), Aegina (2,447 GRT, 1922), Iserlohn (3,704 GRT, 1922), the Italian ammunition ship Sabaudia (1,590 GRT) and the Italian destroyers Luca Tarigo and Baleno were shelled and sunk off the Kerkennah Islands, Tunisia, by the 14th Destroyer Flotilla consisting of HM Ships Janus, Jervis, Mohawk and Nubian, commanded by Captain Mack in Jervis.
  - The German cargo ship Arta (2,452 GRT, 1921) was beached off the Kerkennah Islands.
  - The Italian destroyer Lampo (1,218/2,063 t, 1932) was heavily damaged and ran aground in the action.
  - HMS Mohawk was torpedoed and sunk by Luca Tarigo with the loss of 43 of her 219 crew.
- The British had been alerted to the convoy's sailing by radio intercepts. On 15 April, a Maryland reconnaissance plane had sighted and shadowed the convoy and the four British destroyers left Malta at 6 p.m. to intercept.
- Using radar, the British ships ambushed the Axis convoy in the dark as it maneuvered around the shallow waters surrounding the Kerkennah Islands.
- As the convoy passed a buoy marking sandbanks, the British opened fire at 2,000 yards and closed to as near as 50 yards.

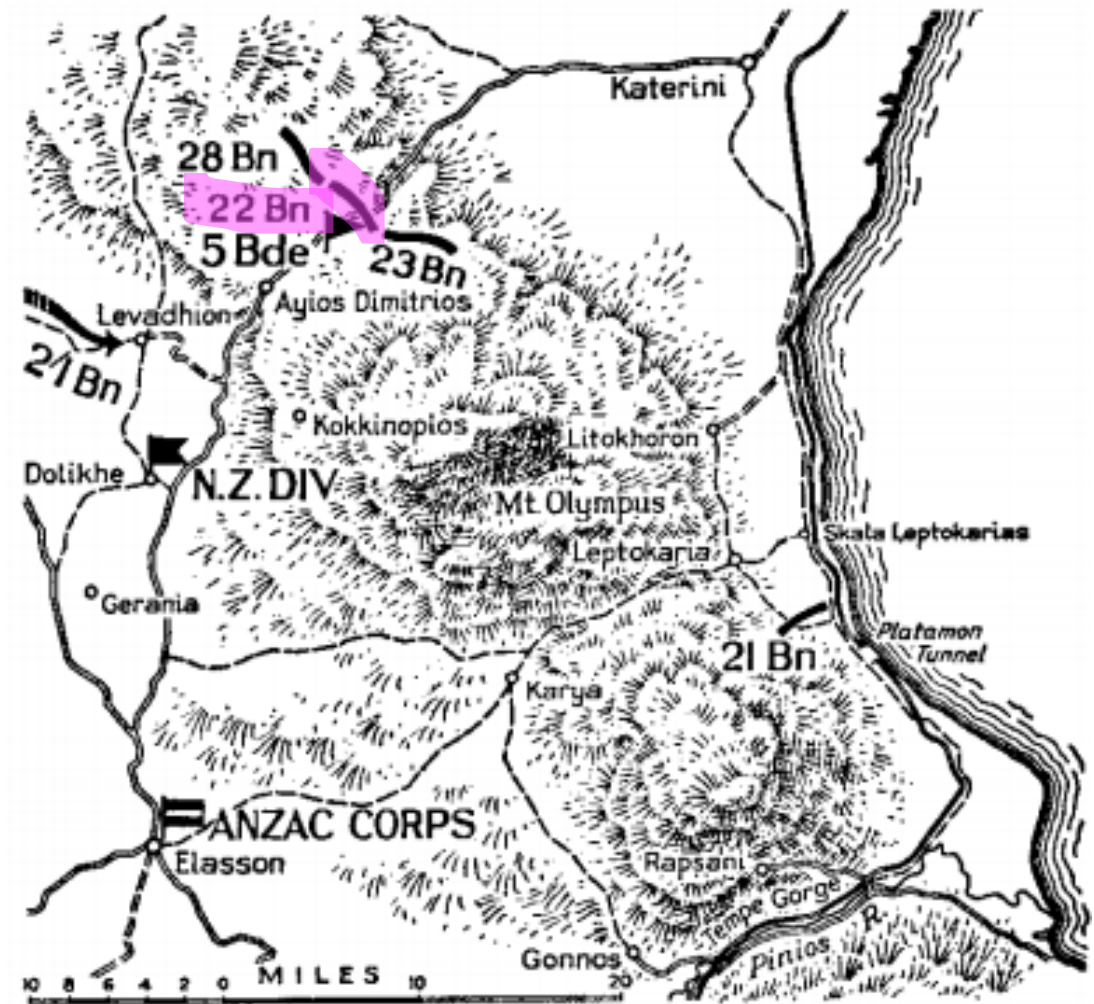


HMS Nubian off Malta 1943

An important part of the convoy's cargo had been much of the transport and heavy equipment of the German 15th Armoured Division.

# 16 April 1941 - Greece

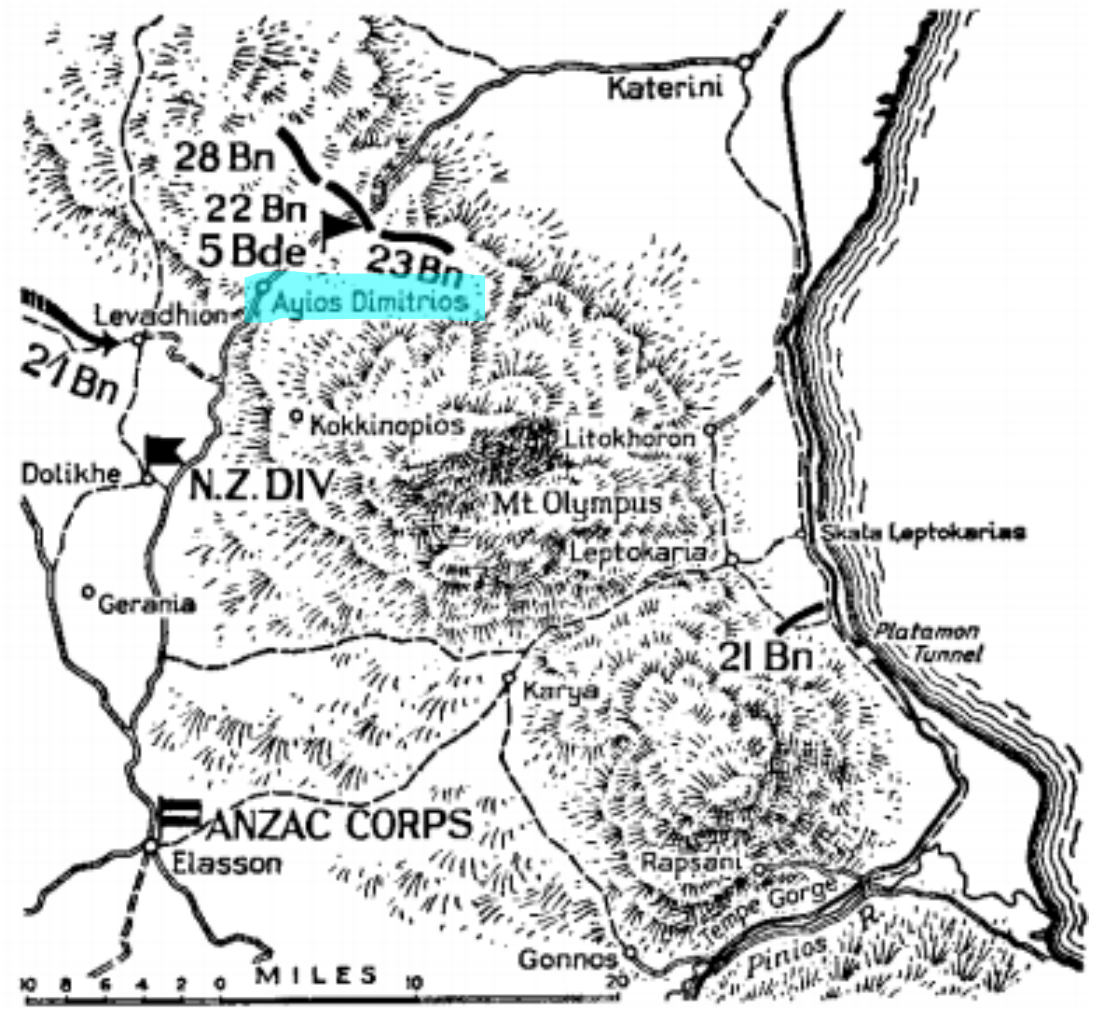
- Soon after dawn the 22nd was attacked; but the German infantry withdrew when artillery and mortars fired on them.
- Vehicles were crowding the road for 14 miles back, as far as Katerini, the first three miles of the column consisting mainly of tanks, troop carriers and motor-cycles.
- About 8.30 a.m. the leading vehicles swiftly moved forward. The artillery observer dropped his range by 800 yards, destroyed fourteen vehicles, including two tanks and broke the attack.
- From 11 a.m. until 3 p.m. rain and mist made it impossible to see more than a few hundred yards.
- On the Maoris' (28<sup>th</sup>) sector suddenly enemy troops began to swarm forward. They were fired on and fell back, but in a few moments the forward Maori section was sharply bombarded with mortars, grenades and bullets, and the German mountain troops clambered up the hill and overran the foremost Maori posts. However, the enemy had lost heavily and the survivors were gradually pushed back into the ravine.
- This flank was reinforced and the situation became stable, but the battalion was an hour and a half late in beginning to withdraw along greasy tracks in pitch darkness.



Dawn, 15th April.

# 16 April 1941 - Greece

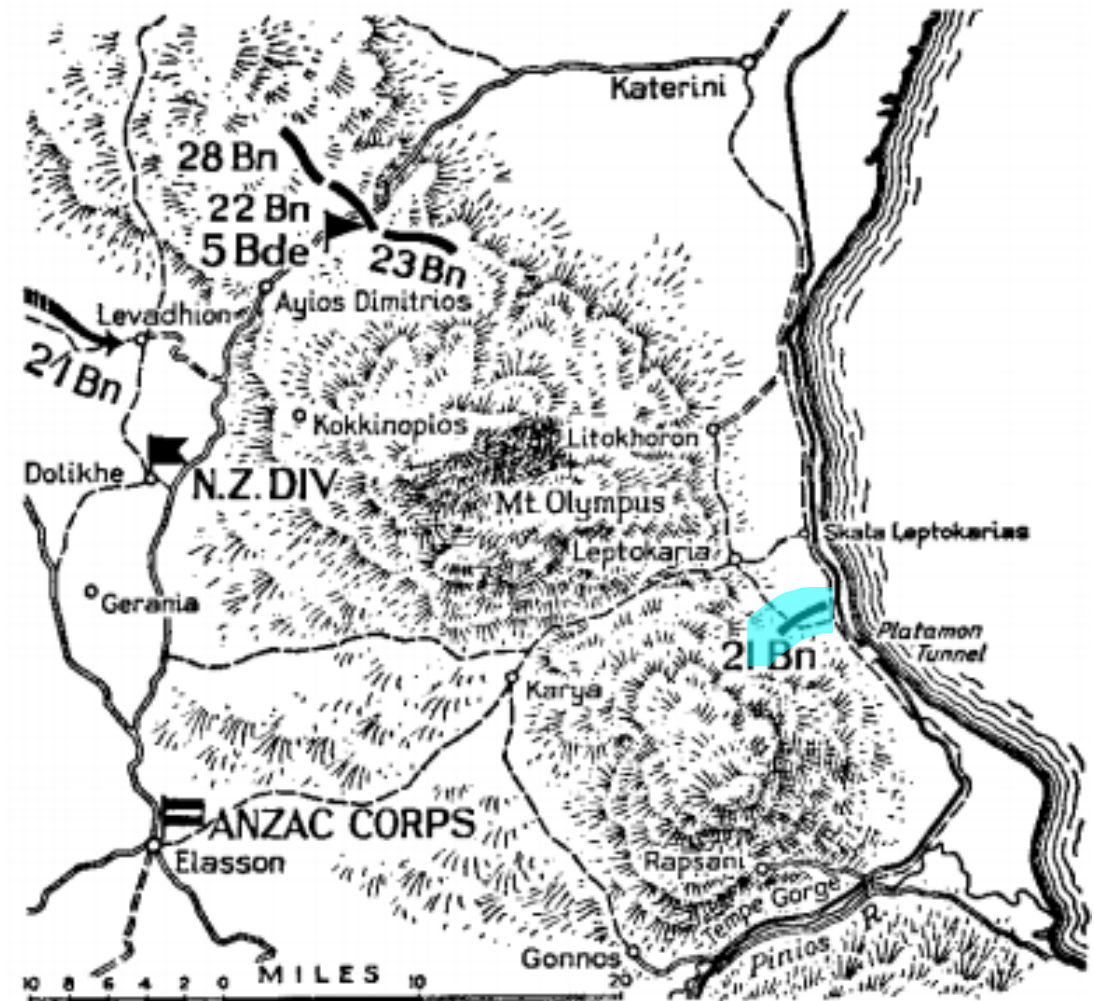
- The other battalions withdrew more or less according to plan.
- The nine 2-pounders supporting them had been doomed when the action began and after an effort to man-handle them out, were reluctantly tipped over cliffs.
- Ten carriers and twenty trucks were also abandoned. Craters were blown in the road and the new position was occupied astride the top of the pass seven miles to the south-west (through **Ayios Dimitrios** and Kokkinoplos) where the brigade was to hold until its withdrawal to the Thermopylae position the following night.



Dawn, 15th April.

# 16 April 1941 - Greece

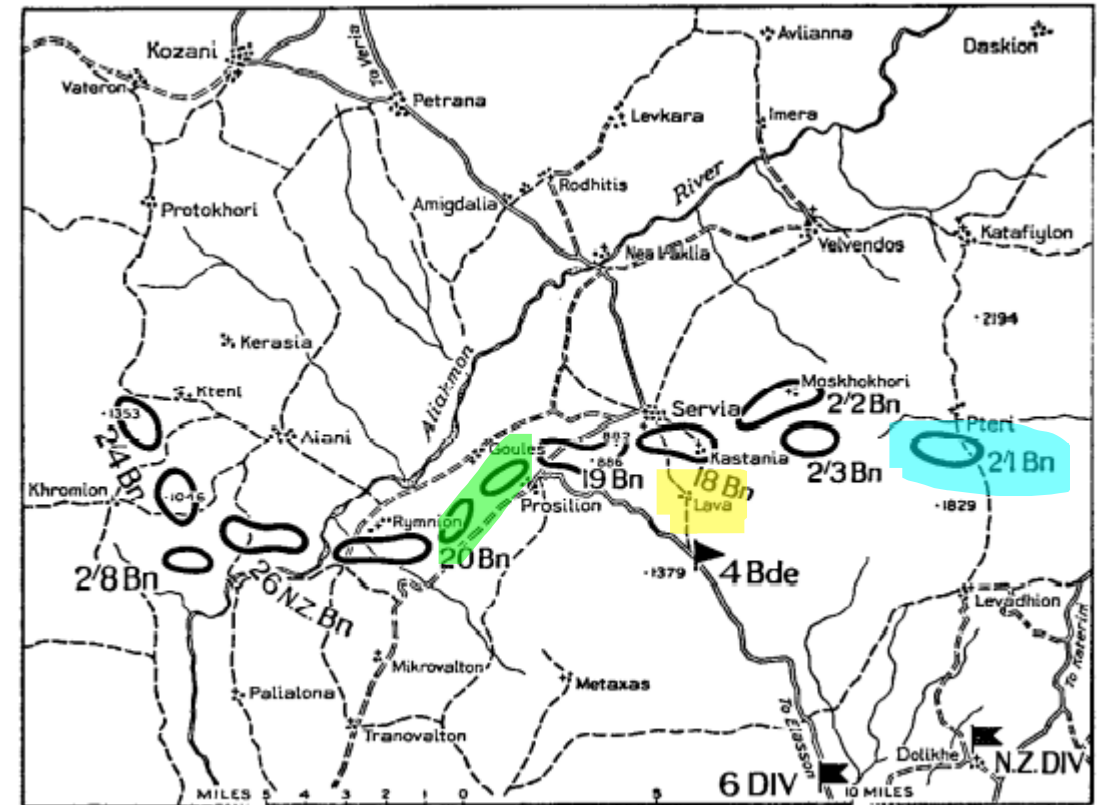
- Infantry attacked the left company of the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion at dawn and tanks attacked along the coast at 9 a.m.
- When his left company had been out of touch for some time, and two companies farther down the hill were being fired on from the flank and rear, Colonel Macky gave the order to retire.
- The withdrawal was covered by the reserve company, which was on a ridge south of that pierced by the tunnel.
- Soon after 10 a.m. Macky reported by wireless to corps headquarters that he could no longer hold.
- The battalion's wireless set was then destroyed and most of the telephone cable abandoned.



Dawn, 15th April.

# 16 April 1941 - Greece

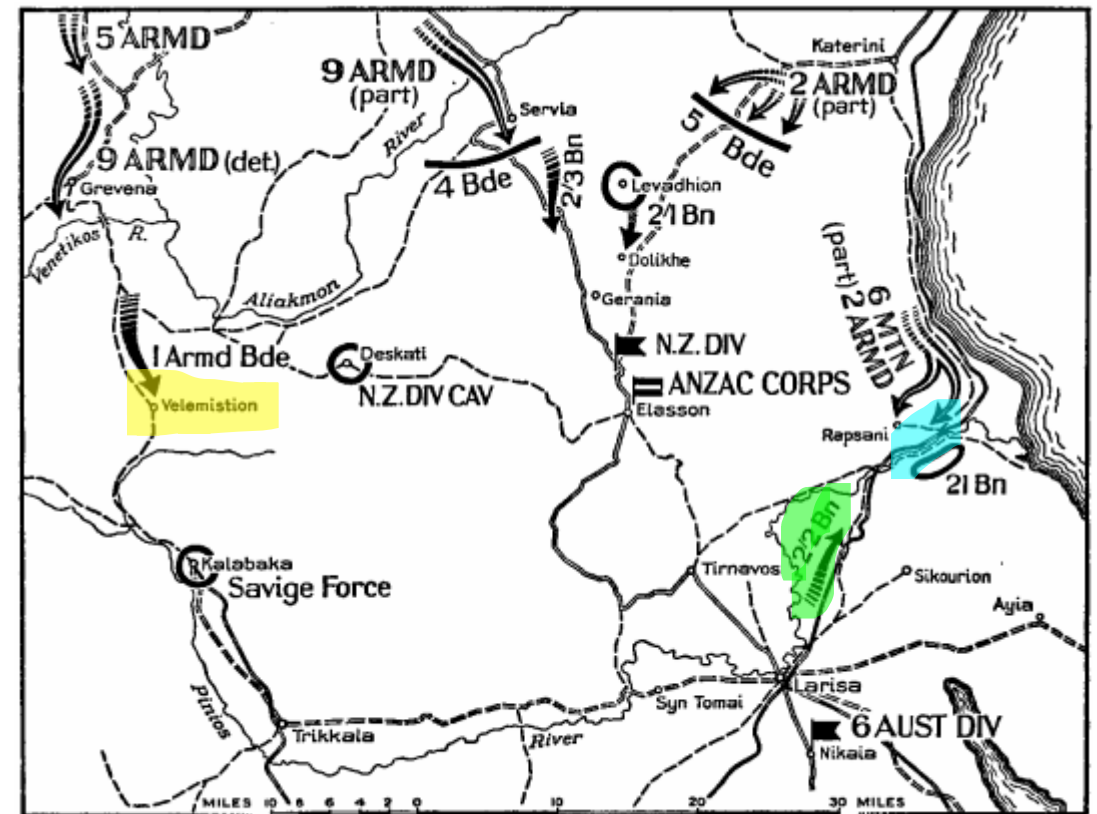
- On the morning of the 16th the CO of the 2/1st, Lt-Col Campbell and his pioneer lieutenant, Fairbairn, found a track back over the mountains and so learnt that the battalion should have withdrawn the previous night.
- The enemy made no further infantry attacks on the 16th, though the artillery duel and the aerial bombing continued.
- In the morning of the 16th the 2/2nd Field Regiment pulled out its guns and withdrew to join the flank guard at Zarkos.
- After dark on the 16th the 2/3rd Field Regiment withdrew to Elasson to support the 6th New Zealand Brigade in its rearguard position there.
- In the night drive up the zigzag road one gun fell over the cliff and had to be abandoned—the third gun the regiment had lost since the fighting began.
- Puttick's left battalion—the 20th—was withdrawn on the night 16th-17th to a position astride the road at Lava to cover the retirement of the brigade the following night.



Dispositions, 15th April.

# 16 April 1941 - Greece

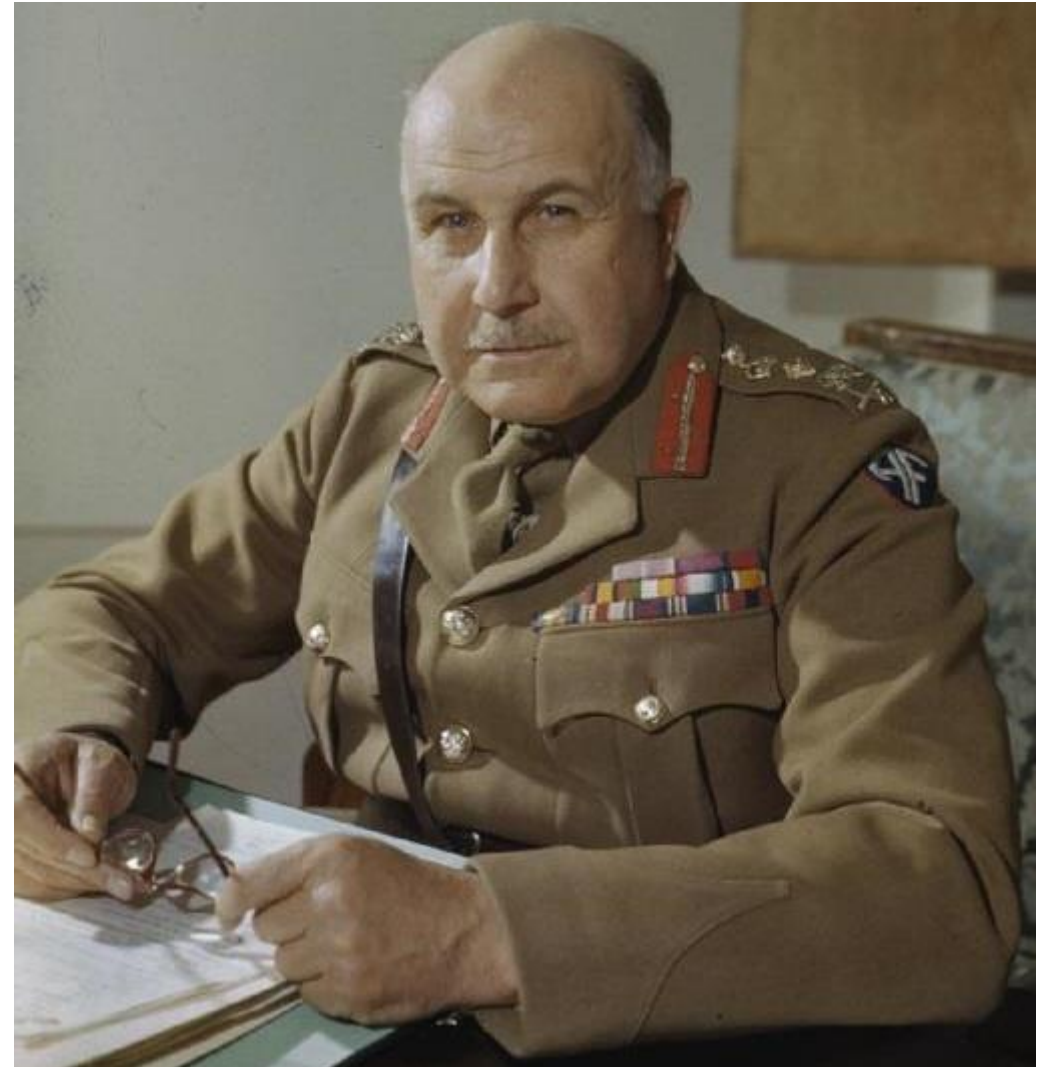
- In the early hours, disturbing signals had arrived from the right flank. Blamey's headquarters ordered that the first available battalion of the 16th Brigade be stopped on the road so that it could be sent to the **Pinios Gorge**.
- When the weary men of the **2/2nd Battalion** arrived at the main road at 10 o'clock that morning, after marching since 2 a.m., many on blistered feet and most with worn-out boots and torn clothing, Lt-Col Chilton was met by a liaison officer with orders to report to corps.
- There Rowell told him that the 21st Battalion's final signals had been disquieting and he did not know whether any of the battalion would be left. Brigadier Clowes had gone out to discover what had happened and had not yet returned.
- A battery of field artillery, a troop of three anti-tank guns and the carriers of two battalions (the 2/5th and 2/11th) would be placed under Chilton's command, and he would go to the Elatia area south-west of the gorge and take steps to hold the western exit possibly for three or four days.
- The 1st Armoured Brigade had reached **Velemistion** that evening having travelled some 20 miles in nine hours along a narrow, cratered road deep in mud, crowded with refugees, and strewn with abandoned vehicles and weapons.



Dusk, 16th April.

# 16 April 1941 - Greece

- On the 16th General Wilson (photo) met General Papagos at Lamia and informed him of his decision to withdraw to Thermopylae and Papagos expressed approval.
- Papagos described the situation of the Greek Army—the Klisoura Pass had been lost and the Western Macedonian divisions "had taken to the mountains and were likely to turn up at Metsovon or Kalabaka but not for several days".
- That morning General Wavell had sent a message to Wilson that "we must of course continue to fight in close cooperation with Greeks but from news here it looks as if early further withdrawal necessary".
- Further withdrawal could only mean embarkation from Greece.

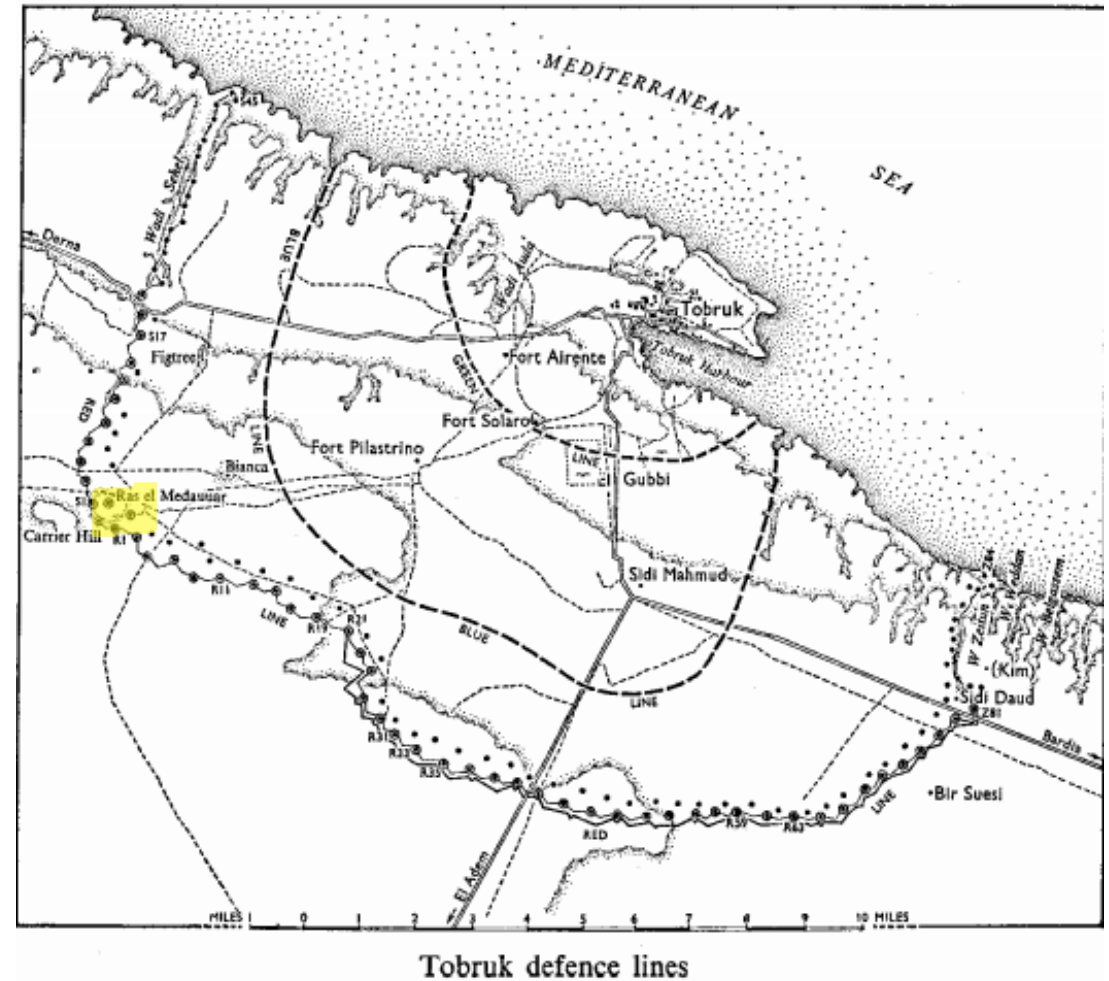


# 16 April 1941 - Greece

- The train bearing the 2/7th was under a prolonged attack from the air near Larisa on the following night (15/16<sup>th</sup>), and the crew disappeared.
- However, in the early hours of the morning some Victorian railwaymen led by Corporal "Jock " Taylor, who had shown himself in the fighting in Cyrenaica to be a cool and intrepid leader, Corporal Melville, and Private Naismith, fired one engine and left it with the fire-box door open as a decoy to delude the German aircraft and,
- while bombers were attacking it, manned another engine 500 yards away and made up a train into which the battalion was loaded and taken to Domokos.

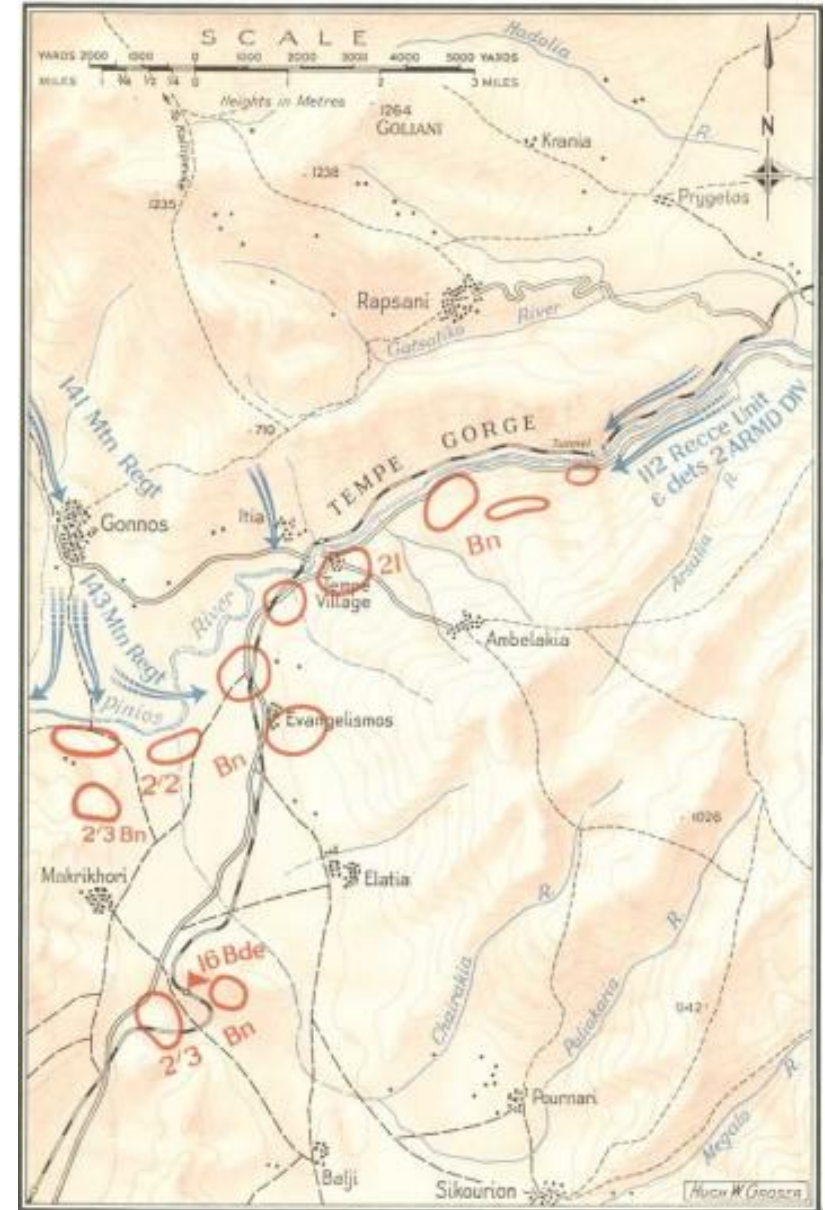
# 17 April 1941 - Libya

- Heavy shelling on the western sector throughout the night of 16th-17th April suggested that another attack might be developing.
- At 10 a.m. (17th April), enemy were observed massing on the right of Ras el Medauar; much motor transport was seen including some vehicles which, through the mirage, looked like tanks.
- The enemy shelled the 2/48<sup>th</sup> battalion, the main artillery observation post on the high ground in the centre had to be evacuated. Machine-guns and mortar fire was the heaviest the unit had experienced.
- Enemy troops dismounted and, soon after midday, came forward to attack along the whole front of Captain Tucker's company, apparently in battalion force. Tanks appeared and rumbled forward through the advancing infantry. They crossed the minefield, which did not operate.
- Some tanks were held up at the perimeter but at 1 p.m. six managed to break through the wire near **Post R2**.
- The enemy infantry assault petered out under the British field-gun fire. Meanwhile the tanks—mainly Italian light tanks—circled the old fort at Ras el Medauar.
- Seven cruiser tanks were sent forward. Anti-tank rifles, gun fire and the cruisers dispatched five Italian tanks, one escaped.
- The enemy infantry and some less adventurous tanks clung to the ground where their advance had been halted by the defenders' artillery fire. They remained just outside the wire, and the artillery was unable to dislodge them before nightfall.



# 17 April 1941 - Greece

- In the front line the 17th passed relatively quietly.
- This comparative calm demonstrated how effectively a retiring force moving back by carefully-planned stages, and demolishing roads and bridges behind it, could delay an advancing army.
- The Germans had to probe forward and find the new positions, to repair the road and bring up their guns — because, where they could not deploy their tanks, they could do nothing without their guns.
- In the Pinios Gorge during the 17th Colonels Chilton and Macky were able to prepare their defences with relatively little interruption.
- The 2/3<sup>rd</sup> had reached the main road south of the Servia Pass at midnight on the 16th-17th, marched for two hours to reach their vehicles, and driven through Larisa to the Pinios area. The three remaining rifle companies were below strength because, on the way through Larisa, the drivers of several trucks mistakenly followed the main stream of traffic towards Lamia and lost touch with the battalion.
- Brigadier Allen arrived at 1 p.m.
- In the evening the leading German patrols appeared on the North side of the gorge. A few Australians were wounded in exchanges of fire across the gorge.



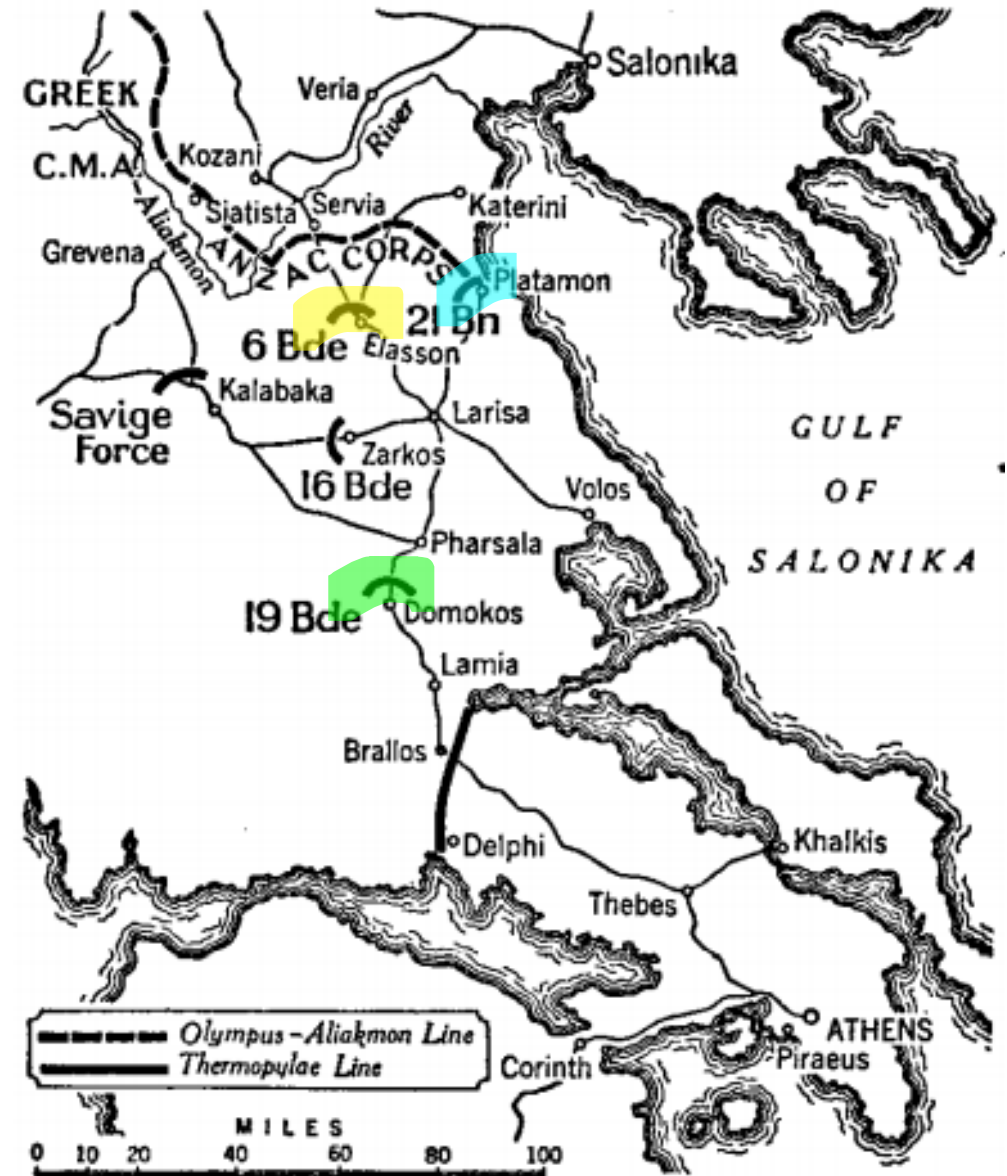
# 17 April 1941 - Greece

- Organisation of the naval side of the evacuation in Greece was handled by Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman, formerly captain of Ramillies, and now Flag Officer Attached, Middle East.
- Baillie-Grohman arrived in Athens on the 17th April, and found a confused situation.
- Piraeus, the only port with quays for large vessels apart from Kalamata in the Morea, was wrecked when the Clan Fraser blew up.
- It was clear that embarkation would mainly be from beaches, and suitable places were reconnoitred, and arrangements made to charter and fit out caiques and other local craft for ferrying purposes.



# 17 April 1941 - Greece

- During the 17th Brigadier Lee's rearguard force at **Domokos** was assembled. From the north arrived the 2/4th and 2/8th Battalions, the 2/8th now 533 strong but short of weapons. The men of the newly arrived 2/1st Field Regiment arrived late that night. The 2/6th Battalion had arrived at Domokos by train on the 16th; the 2/7th, in the train its own men had made up and driven, arrived from Larisa on the morning of the 17th.



# 17 April 1941 - Greece

- General Wilson attended a conference with the King, Papagos, the British Minister (Palaiet), D 'Albiac and Admiral Turle.
- The discussion which ensued revolved round: whether it was possible to carry on the war; whether it would be advisable for the British-Imperial Forces to hold on or evacuate, and defeatism spreading widely in the body politic.
- That evening the Prime Minister, M. Koryzis (photo), "after telling the King that he felt he had failed him in the task entrusted to him" committed suicide.



# 17 April 1941 - Yugoslavia

- On 17 April the pre-coup Foreign Minister Aleksandar Cincar-Marković and General Janković signed the armistice and unconditionally surrendered all Yugoslav troops.
- After the surrender, Yugoslavia was divided amongst Germany, Hungary, Italy and Bulgaria. Germany took control of most of Serbia.
- Ante Pavelić, leader of the fascist Ustaše, declared an Independent State of Croatia before the invasion was even over, Croatia was actually under the joint control of Germany and Italy.
- Many Serbian nationalists blamed the loss on "fifth columnist" Croats who stood to gain from Italian and German rule, ignoring the primary failure of the Yugoslav Army and its almost entirely Serbian leadership.
- Many Croatian nationalists blamed Belgrade politicians and the inadequacy of the Serbian-dominated army.



# 17 April 1941 - London

- On the 16th, after Wilson's conference with Papagos that day, Wavell had sent a telegram to Mr Churchill informing him what had been said, including Papagos' proposal that the British force should leave Greece.
- Churchill replied on the 17th:
- “We cannot remain in Greece against wish of Greek Commander-in-Chief, and thus expose country to devastation. Wilson or Palairets should obtain endorsement by Greek Government of Papagos' request. Consequent upon this assent, evacuation should proceed, without however prejudicing any withdrawal to Thermopylae position in cooperation with the Greek Army. You will naturally try to save as much material as possible.”

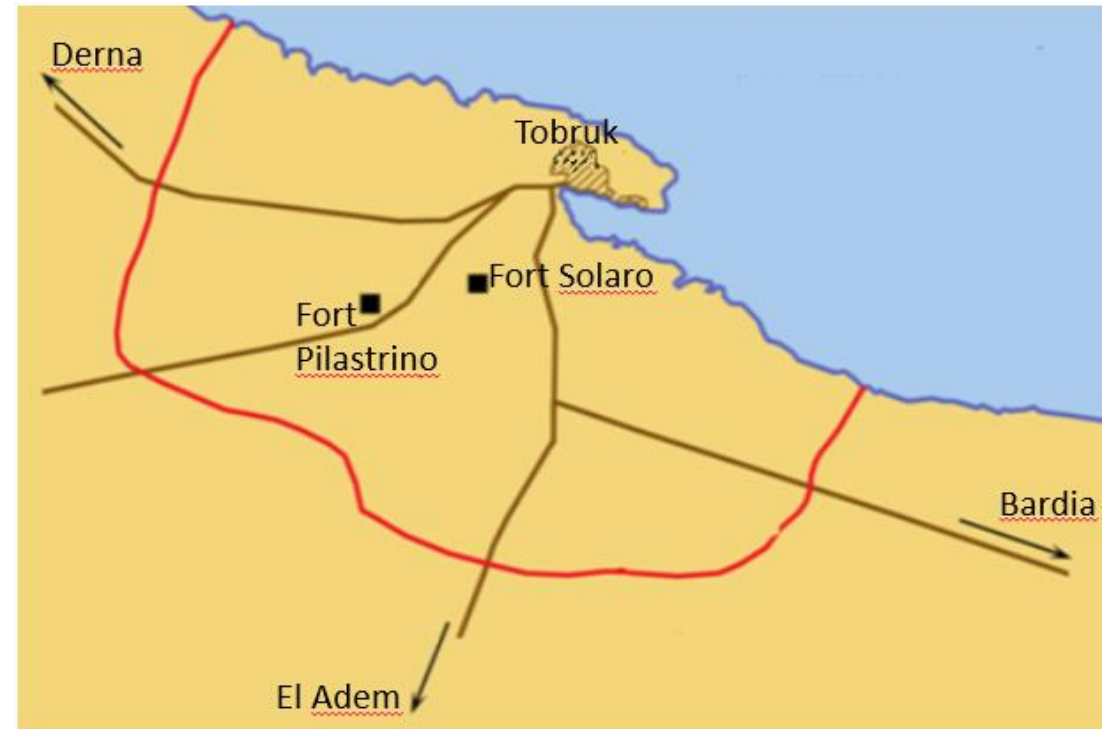
# 18 April 1941 - Melbourne

- On the 18th April 1941 Mr Hughes, Minister for the Navy, approved the employment of twelve telegraphists and two attendants—selected from the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps—for duty at Harman wireless station, Canberra.
- These were the first of the WRANS.



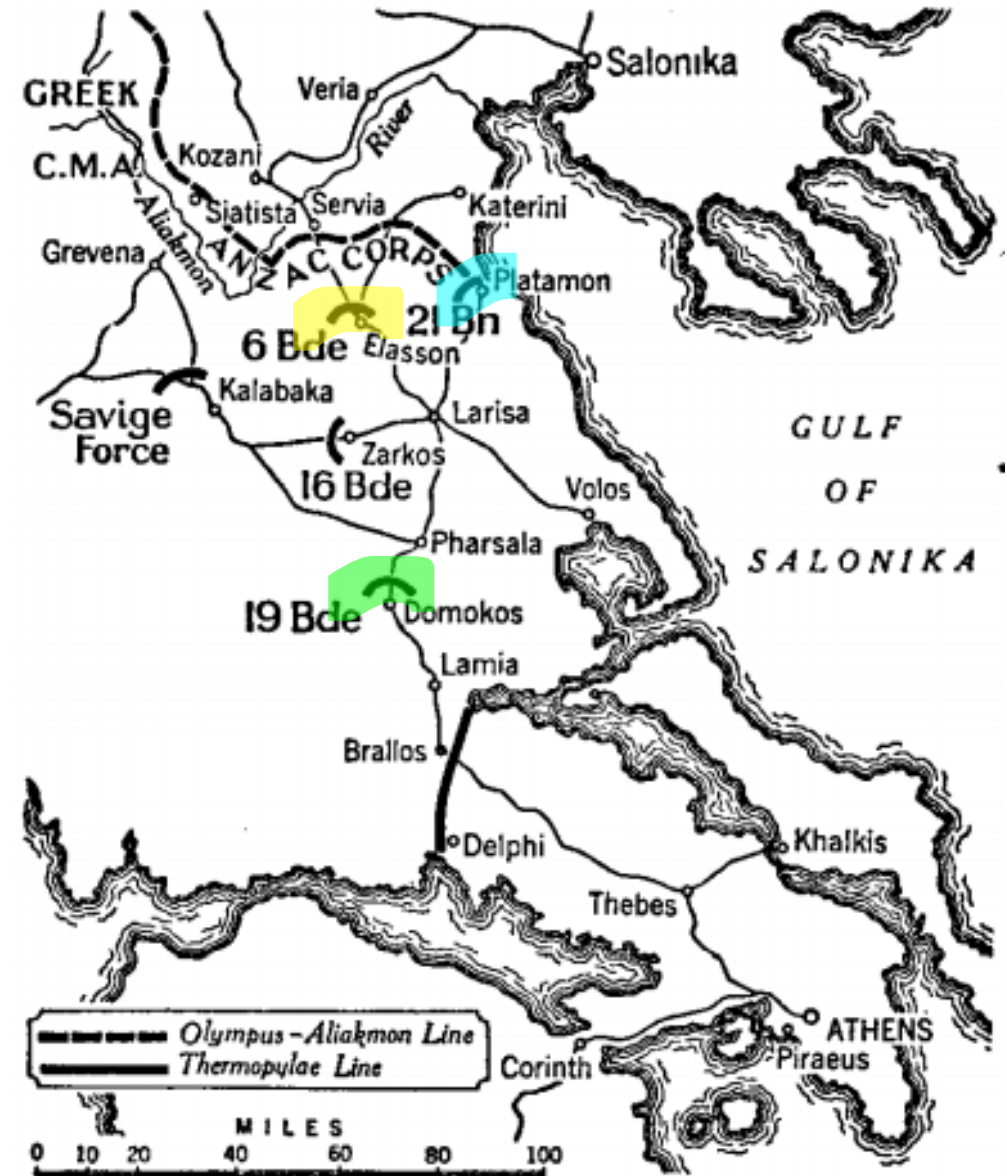
# 18 April 1941 - Libya

- By comparison with the last few eventful days, but not by any other standard, 18th April was quiet.



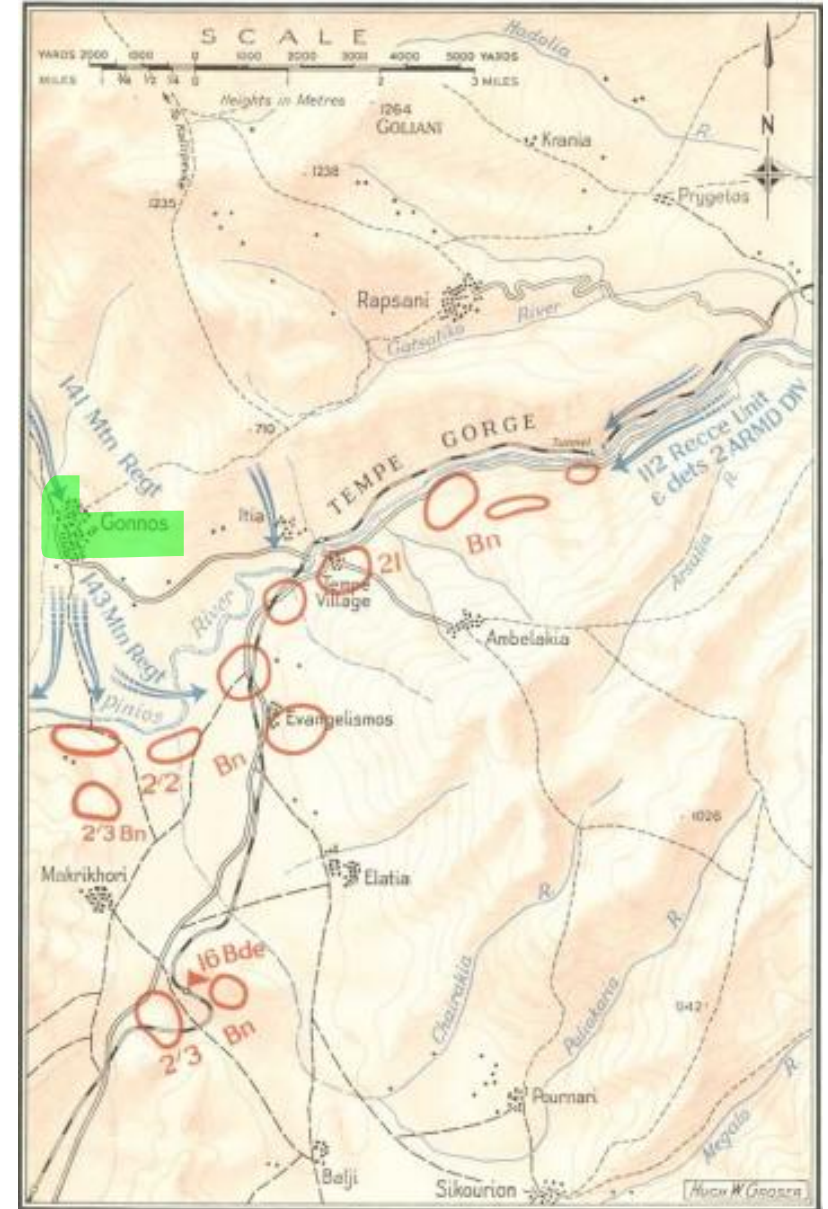
# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- At 6 a.m. on 18<sup>th</sup> Kippenberger ordered the final demolition. Except for his rearguard the hazardous withdrawal from the Servia Pass was complete. The road was now covered by Brigadier Barrowclough's augmented **6th Brigade Group** back at Elasson.
- At 1.30 a.m. on the 18th Savige informed Grieve that his withdrawal would begin immediately—he had already sent out his British medium artillery and his New Zealand battery less one troop—and that he expected to be in the Larisa area not later than 5 p.m., possibly earlier if the state of the roads allowed.



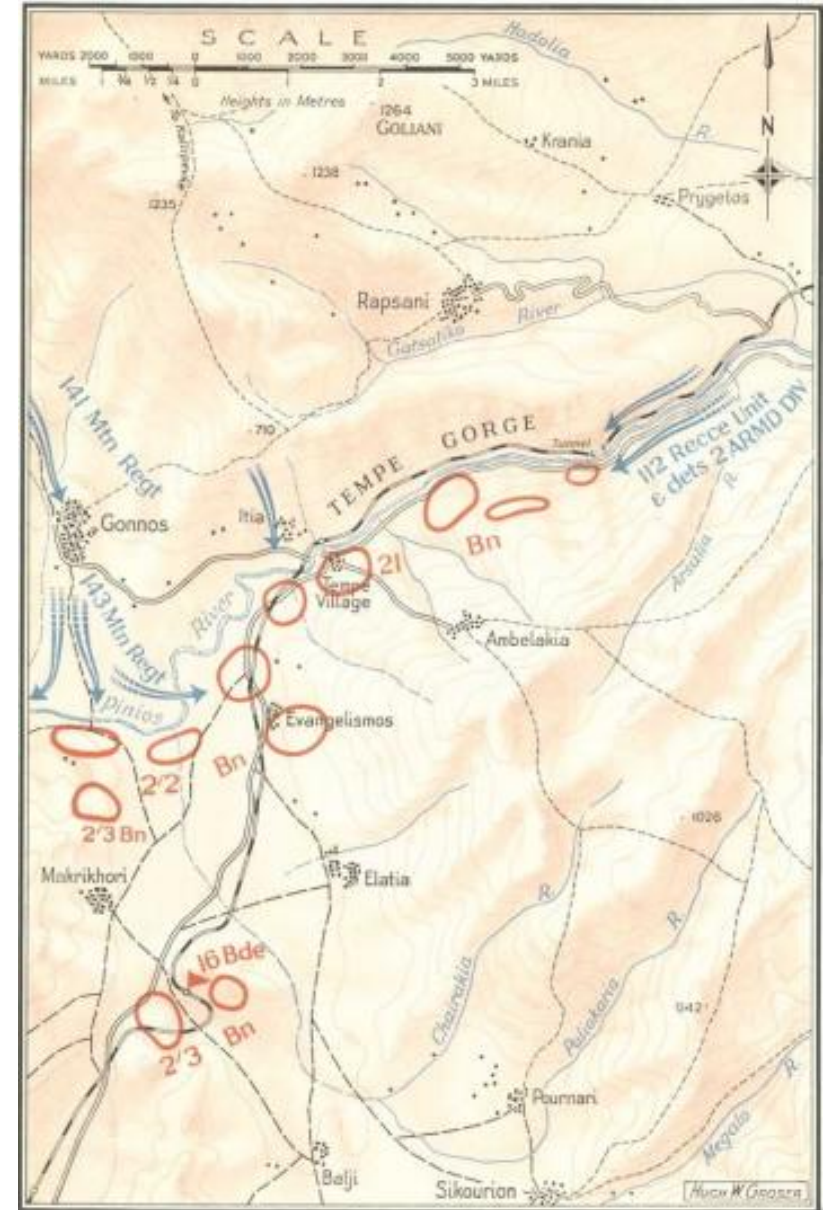
# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- The 18th April was clear and fine.
- In the Pinios Gorge about 7 a.m. German troops were seen moving down the slopes from Gonnos south-east towards the river. They increased in numbers until it appeared that a battalion was deployed there, and another battalion (or so it seemed) was moving west from Gonnos along the tracks leading towards the main road between Elasson and Tirnavos.
- Captain Hendry, commanding the left company of the 2/2nd Battalion in the absence of an artillery observer directed fire on the enemy across the river.
- It was still early in the morning when, from the high ground, a trickle of men were seen moving south along a track from Parapotamos. A patrol sent out to investigate came under sharp fire, and a long fight began in which the Australians suffered casualties.
- In response to Hendry's report that enemy troops were moving round his left and out of range, Chilton sent out his carrier platoon to intercept them. They also got into a sharp fight and suffered casualties.
- Early in the morning while it was still misty, about forty Germans appeared on the bank of the river opposite Buckley's company—the right flank of the 2/2nd. The Germans were bunched in a way that puzzled the Australians, who fired on them and "wiped them out".



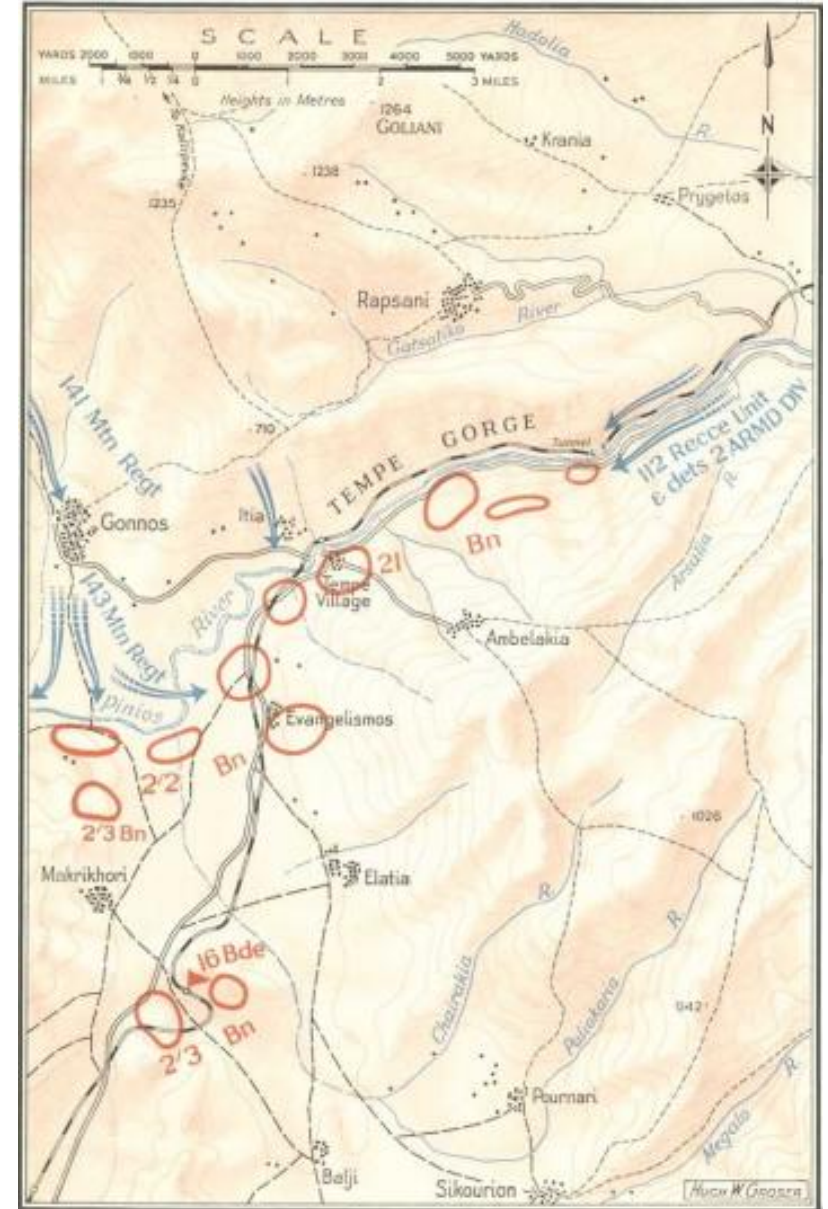
# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- Throughout the morning German activity on the front of the 21st Battalion increased and by midday a heavy attack was in progress. The Germans cleared away the road-block and their tanks came through. The first tank knocked out the nearest 2-pounder gun and the second tank advanced past it. These and other tanks farther back and German infantry across the narrow gorge fired on the exposed positions of the 21st on the bare forward slopes of Mount Ossa.
- The foremost platoons were pushed back. Three tanks moved slowly along the road below. When the nearest was almost under the noses of the nearest gunners they fired. Two tanks were knocked out and the third hit several times.
- By now enemy infantry had crossed the river behind the gunners. One gun crew escaped and squads of infantry with machine pistols crept close to another gun while mortars across the river concentrated on it; the crew was driven off or captured.
- The tanks were then engaged by indirect fire from the field guns and they stopped for some hours.
- With tanks a stone's throw below, scorching the hillsides with machine-gun fire, and large bodies of infantry just across the gorge, the remaining 21st Battalion positions on the bare slopes south of the river became less and less tenable. Platoon by platoon the unit fell back.
- Over the crest of the main ridge were innumerable gullies in which it was impossible to collect the scattered fragments of the battalion. The battalion had lost its cohesion.



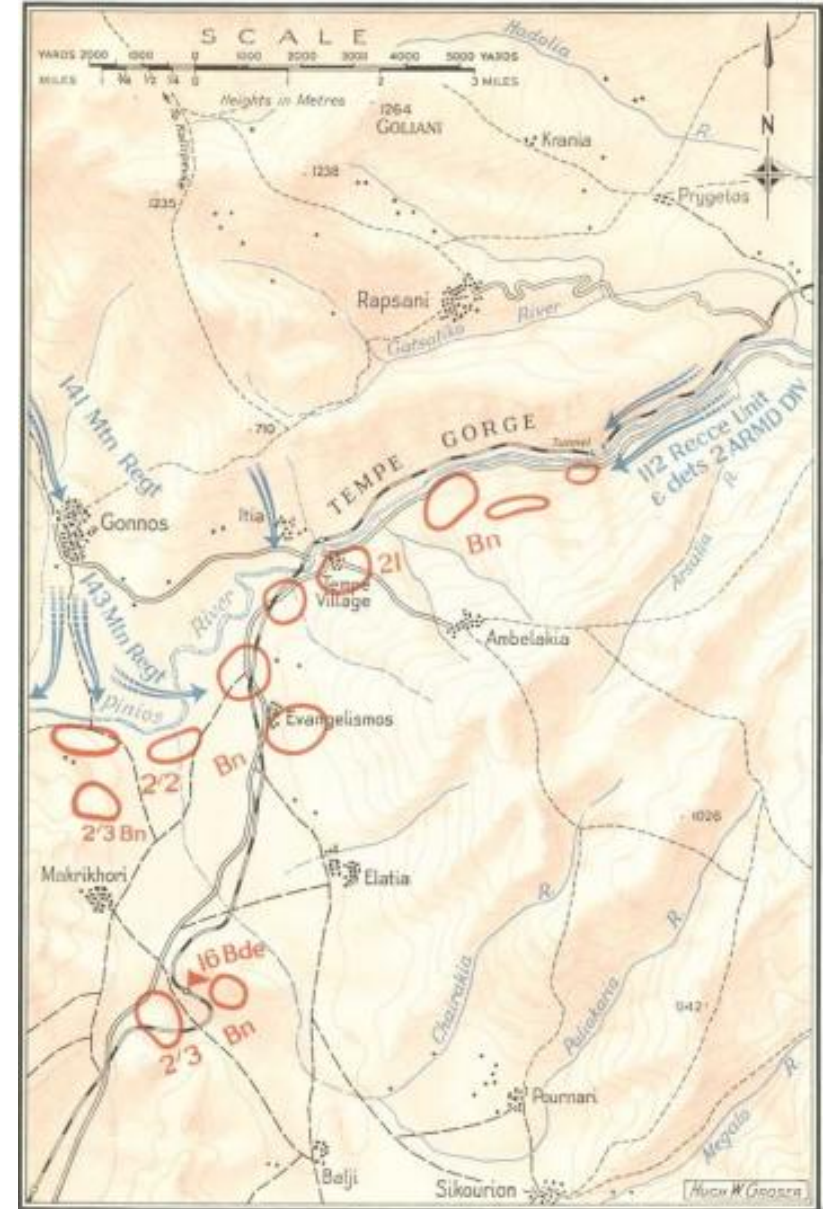
# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- After the withdrawal of the New Zealanders the Australian battalion was not heavily pressed for more than two hours, though the whole area was under intermittent mortar and machine-gun fire.
- So far the Australians had lost about forty killed and wounded.
- Then at 3 p.m. a concerted attack began. First thirty-five aircraft appeared and for half an hour circled Makrikhori railway station dropping bombs.
- The foremost platoon of the 2/2nd was Lieutenant Lovett's, about 400 yards forward of Buckley's headquarters. A tank drove through its position and, with the tank between them and company headquarters, most of the platoon fell back across the road to the slopes on the south side, Lovett himself being wounded.
- At this stage an Australian anti-tank gun in Buckley's area was disabled and the crew put their hands up, but were shot at by the advancing tanks.



# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- A heavy infantry attack had been made on Captain Caldwell's company next to the left. What appeared to be a German battalion began to wade the river on his left, supported by machine-gun fire from the slopes above.
- As they moved across the river and on to the flats they were met by intense and accurate fire from the Bren gunners of this company, the next to the left and battalion headquarters, and were showered with bombs by Sergeant Coyle's two 3-inch mortars. In an hour and a half, firing until the barrels were "almost red hot", Coyle's team lobbed 350 bombs with deadly effect among the advancing Germans.
- The infantrymen saw broken rafts and many dead bodies floating down the stream. This fire and the fire of the Bren guns broke the attack across the river, but the tanks continued to press forward along the road.



# 18 April 1941 - Greece

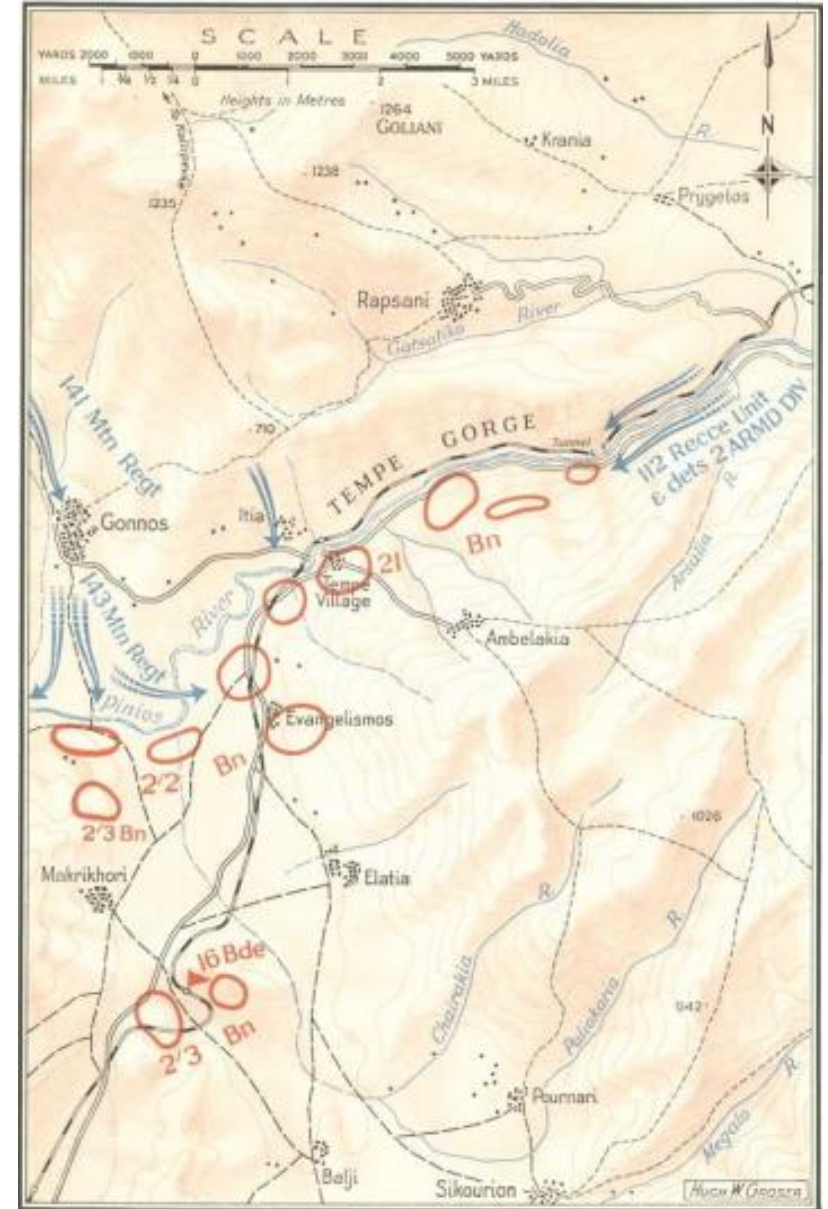
- At about 5.00 the 2/2<sup>nd</sup> phone lines to all the companies were broken.
- Confusion over orders lead to Hendry's company of the 2/2<sup>nd</sup> and Murchison's company of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> withdrawing to Brigade headquarters.
- In a duel between tanks and two forward 25 pounders three tanks were destroyed but then at 6.5pm ten tanks, closely followed by infantry, broke into Caldwell's position.
- Caldwell withdrew his headquarters, first 150 and then 400 yards from the road, whence, like Buckley's company on his right, his men watched about eighteen tanks move forward; as they emerged from the defile the tanks deployed and moved south astride the road. Infantry and, at a short distance, another six or eight tanks, followed.
- Allen wrote a detailed order for the withdrawal of the force and at 5.30 handed it to Lt Swinton, one of the liaison officers, to deliver to Chilton and Parkinson. But Swinton was unable to find either of them.
- A dense cloud of smoke was rising from the burning tanks and drifting south-west, making a smoke screen under cover of which more tanks and infantry moved on the flat west of the road.
- Runners at length arrived from both Buckley's and Caldwell's companies announcing that those companies had retreated up the slopes of the hill—the first news of these companies for more than an hour.
- At 6.45 Chilton decided that King's company would soon be surrounded and could not delay the advance of the tanks or infantry along the flat country west of the road. He ordered it to withdraw. It moved out in good order and Chilton followed.

# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- At 5.45 Hendry's and Murchison's companies began to arrive at Allen's headquarters, and the New Zealand guns which had been in support of the 2/2nd were moving through the area.
- It was evident that the 21st and 2/2nd (except one company) were cut off.
- Allen's orders from Freyberg were to deny the enemy a line through the Tempe-Sikourion road junction until 3 a.m. He told Lieutenant Colonel Lamb of the 2/3rd to stop the gunners and place them in a covering position where road and railway crossed. Allen moved his own headquarters back to this position.
- In the new position one company of the 2/3rd was on a hill on the right of the road, Murchison's company of the 2/3rd and Hendry's of the 2/2nd on low ground on the left with carriers extending the flank and more carriers and a third company of the 2/3rd, only some thirty strong, in reserve.
- About 7.30 p.m. five German tanks appeared, moving astride the road, and were met by a hail of harmless fire from rifles and Brens. Two of the New Zealand 25-pounders were moved up into the line and swung into action in the open, firing at the tanks at close range. Later one of the infantrymen described the scene:
- The officer stood out in the open directing the fire, the crews crouched behind the shields and fed and fired the guns while everything the enemy had was being pelted at them . . . . They looked like a drawing by someone who had never been to a war, but the whole thing was unreal. They got two tanks, lost one gun and pulled the other gun and their wounded out, having done what they could. There was nothing to stop the tanks then, and they formed up and came on.
- A squadron of aircraft then appeared from the direction of Larisa and made strafing runs across the area at the infantry and carriers who fired back with rifles and Brens.
- On the left the tanks pressed forward in the dusk firing until they were in the midst of Hendry's men. At one stage (wrote Hendry) a group of fifteen to twenty men were round a tank firing rifles and L.M.G.s to no apparent effect. This tank crushed two men, Privates Cameron and Dunn. The feeling of helplessness against the tanks overcame the troops and they began to move back in small parties to the trucks. This movement rapidly spread along the line.

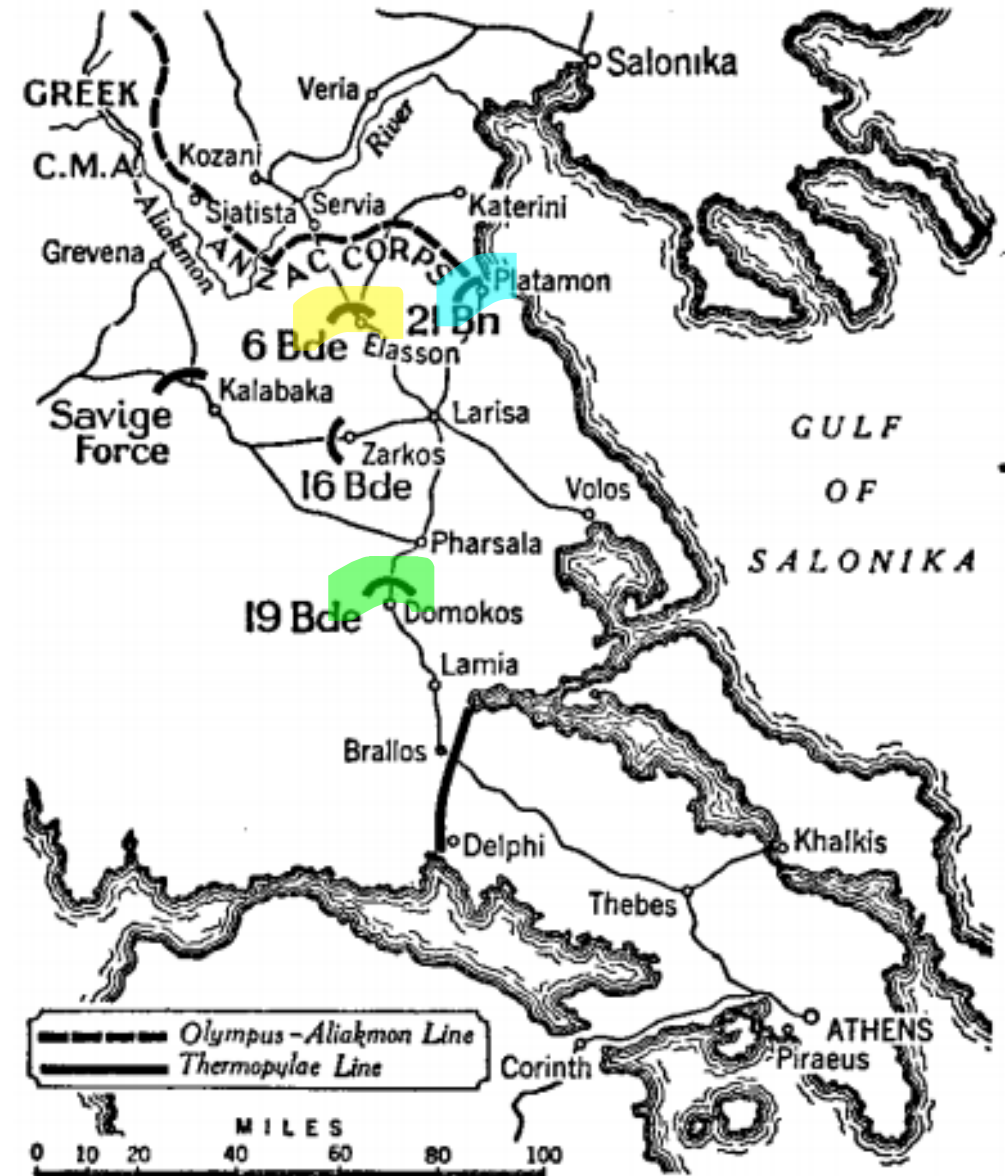
# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- There was then little daylight left and when Lamb halted the vehicles and began forming the infantrymen and carriers across the road 1,000 yards farther south it was dark. The new line was in the shape of a tilted "L" with its shaft across the road and its base beside the railway line on the left.
- In a few minutes the leading tank appeared. A man who was standing waist high in the turret of one of them peering out was riddled with bullets and slumped forward.
- It was a fantastic battle (wrote Allen afterwards). Everybody was on top (no time to dig in), and all in the front line, including artillery, Bren carriers, infantry and various unit headquarters, with unit transport only a few hundred yards in rear. Some confusion could be expected with every weapon firing and aircraft strafing from above.
- If you saw it at the cinema you would say the author had never seen a battle. We had to hold this position until after dark and thanks to the morale of the force it was done. As expected the pressure eased after dark.



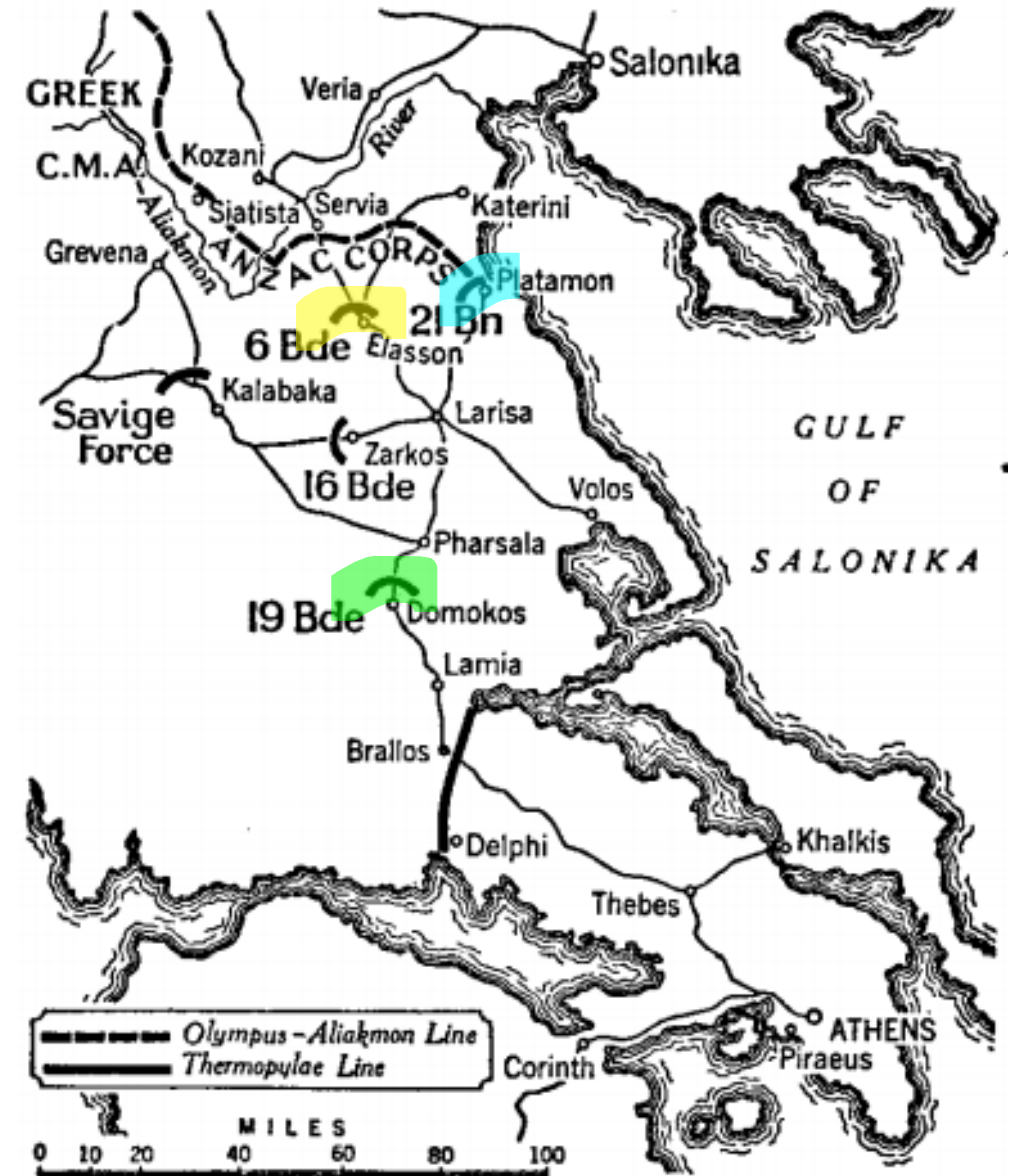
# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- The Larisa road, which was narrow, with ditches each side, was now crowded with moving vehicles. When, about 10 p.m., the leading lorry reached the level crossing two miles from Larisa it ran into a German roadblock.
- Lamb decided to divert the column to the left to the Volos road (as he thought) and, one after another, the crowded trucks and carriers turned left off the main road on to the boggy tracks or into the fields and set off south-eastwards. In fact the first road they would meet did not lead to Volos but was a dead-end road.



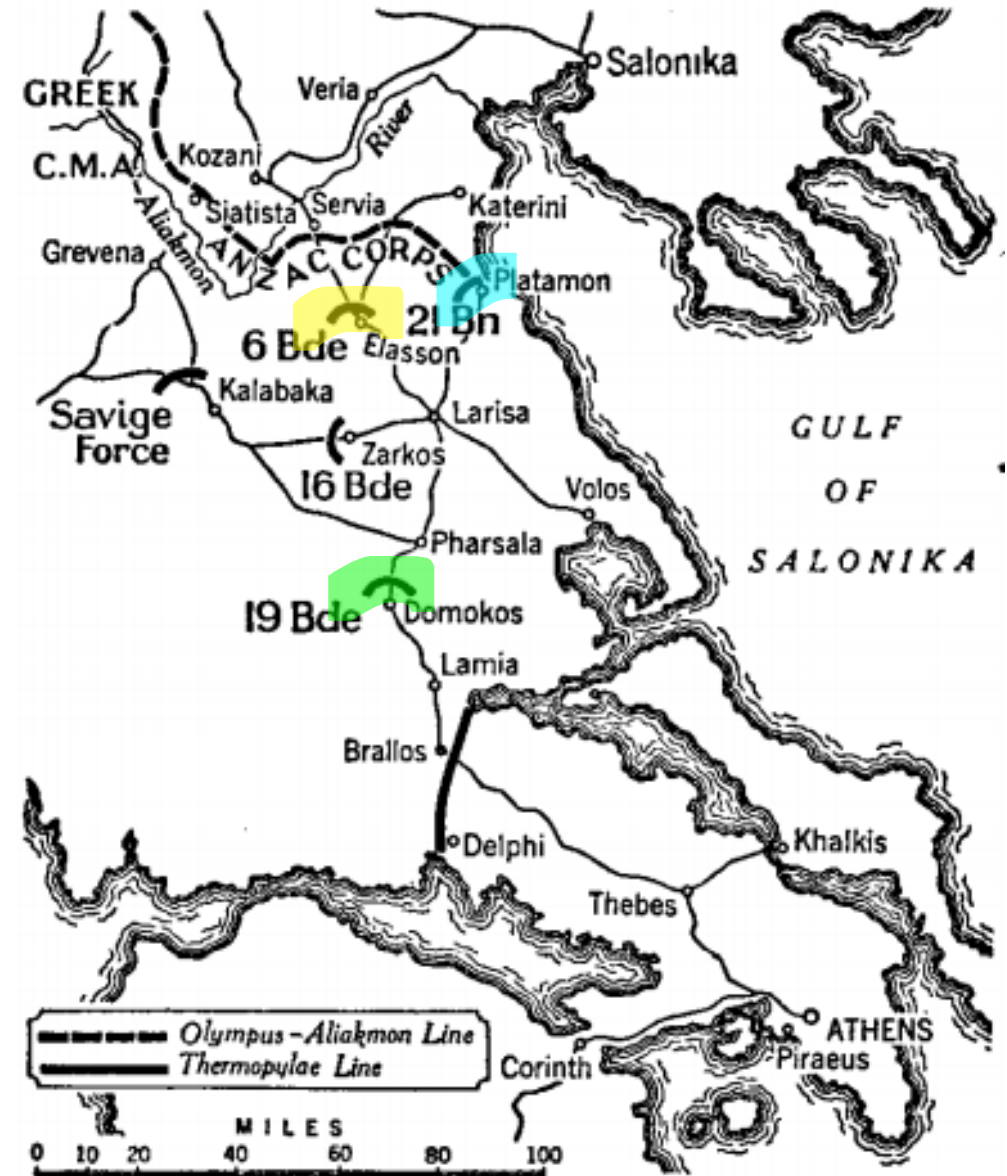
# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- At dawn on the 18th the New Zealand Cavalry Regiment was guarding the junction of the roads from Servia and Katerini.
- The rearguard for the 4th Brigade had been thinned out until it consisted only of Colonel Kippenberger, his driver and batman, some sixty sappers and three Bren carriers, this rearguard had delayed several hours to collect stragglers.
- While the men on the Katerini road were getting breakfast they were surprised to see four tanks and some motor-cycles coming down the road from Katerini.
- The Cavalry's 2 pounders knocked out half a dozen tanks then they withdrew behind 6 Brigade's rearguard at Elasson.
- The German tanks followed up but 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade's strong artillery kept them at bay. The 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment fired 6,500 rounds that day.
- The field guns fired heavily until 11.30 p.m. when the force moved back swiftly, blowing culverts on the way.



# 18 April 1941 - Greece

- At daylight on the 18th an endless procession of trucks was moving fast along the road south from Larisa.
- At 9.30, a loud explosion was heard. German aircraft had attacked the bridge over the Enipeus River north of Pharsala, had missed it, but hit a truck-load of explosives, which were detonated and blew a huge hole in the road on an embankment leading to the bridge. The traffic slowed then stopped. Soon there was a 10 mile long traffic jam.
- Brigadier Steele, the Chief Engineer of Anzac Corps, arrived quickly at the break in the road and directed. The crater was 25 feet in diameter and about 16 feet deep. Steele sent an officer back along the line to order every driver to bring his pick and shovel to the spot, and teams from several units, including a Cypriot pioneer company, were soon at work filling the crater and cutting a detour.
- At 1.30 p.m. the detour was in action and the long column was moving forward again.
- The air attacks did not cease, but as the day went on it became increasingly apparent that though noisy and nerve - wracking, were doing remarkably little damage. The troops were encouraged by their leaders. Some saw Freyberg standing nonchalantly and alone while an aircraft machine-gunned him, and missed. Others heard of Mackay waiting, apparently unconcerned, at the rearguard position at Domokos during an air attack that lasted two and-a-half hours, when his car was hit and his driver wounded.
- Saviges force at Kalabaka withdrew without contact with the enemy conducting extensive demolitions as they went and the tail of its column cleared Larisa about 4 a.m.



# 18 April 1941 - Mediterranean

- Vampire was with two of the last Greek convoys, "AN.27" and "AS.26", both of which suffered in air attacks.
- In the northbound convoy the tanker British Science (7,138 tons) was lost on 18 April.
- In all, between the 22nd March, on which day the first ship losses occurred, and the 18th April twenty-five ships were lost in the operation.
- Only seven of them were sunk in convoys at sea. Most of the remainder were lost in air attacks on Greek ports.



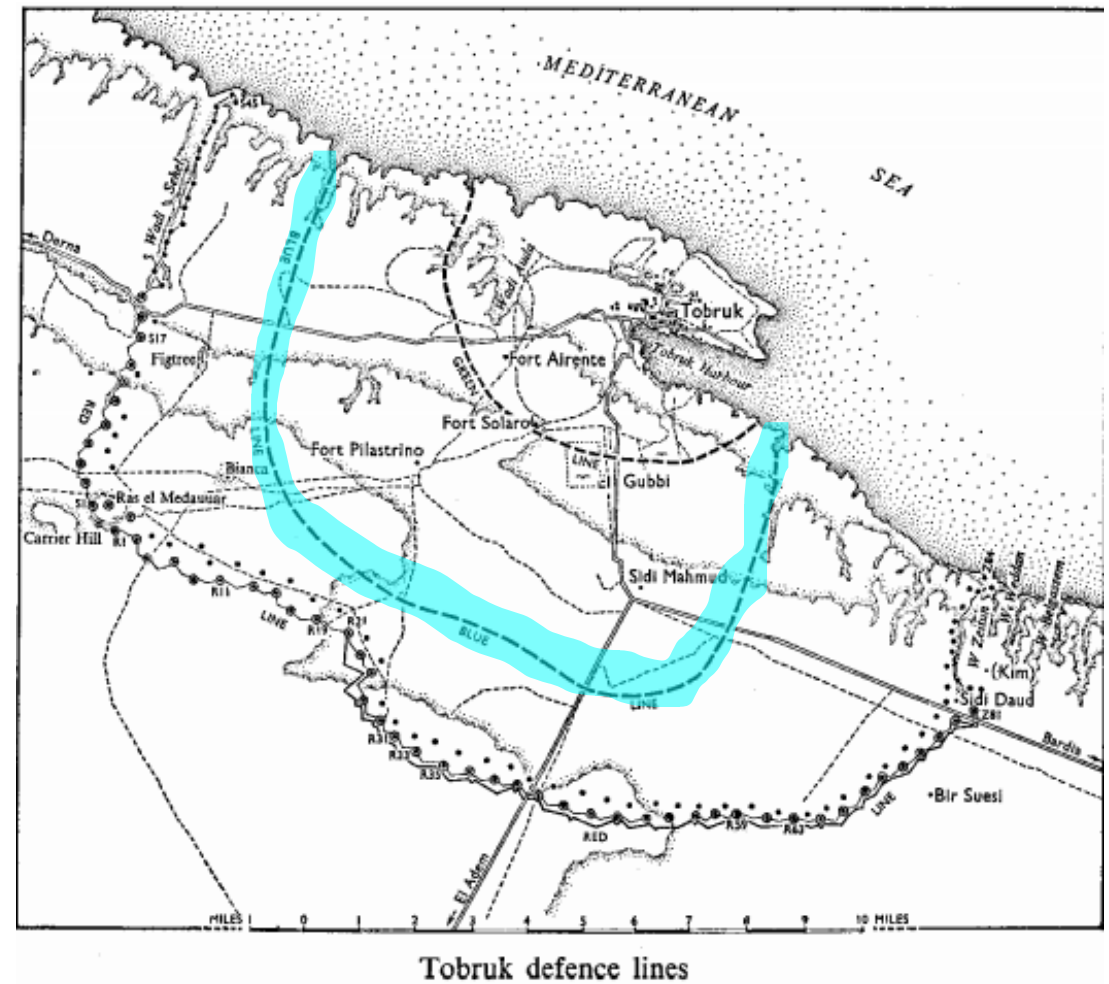
VIEW AFT ALONG THE IRON DECK OF THE DESTROYER HMAS VAMPIRE, AS SHE HEELS INTO A SHARP STARBOARD TURN.

# 18 April 1941 - London

- On the 18th Churchill issued a directive to the Chiefs of Staff and Commanders-in-Chief instructing them that they
- "must divide between protecting evacuation and sustaining battle in Libya. But if these clash, which may be avoidable, emphasis must be given to victory in Libya."
- "Crete will at first only be a receptacle of whatever can get there from Greece. Its fuller defence must be organised later. In the meanwhile all forces there must protect themselves from air bombing by dispersion and use their bayonets against parachutists or airborne intruders if any."

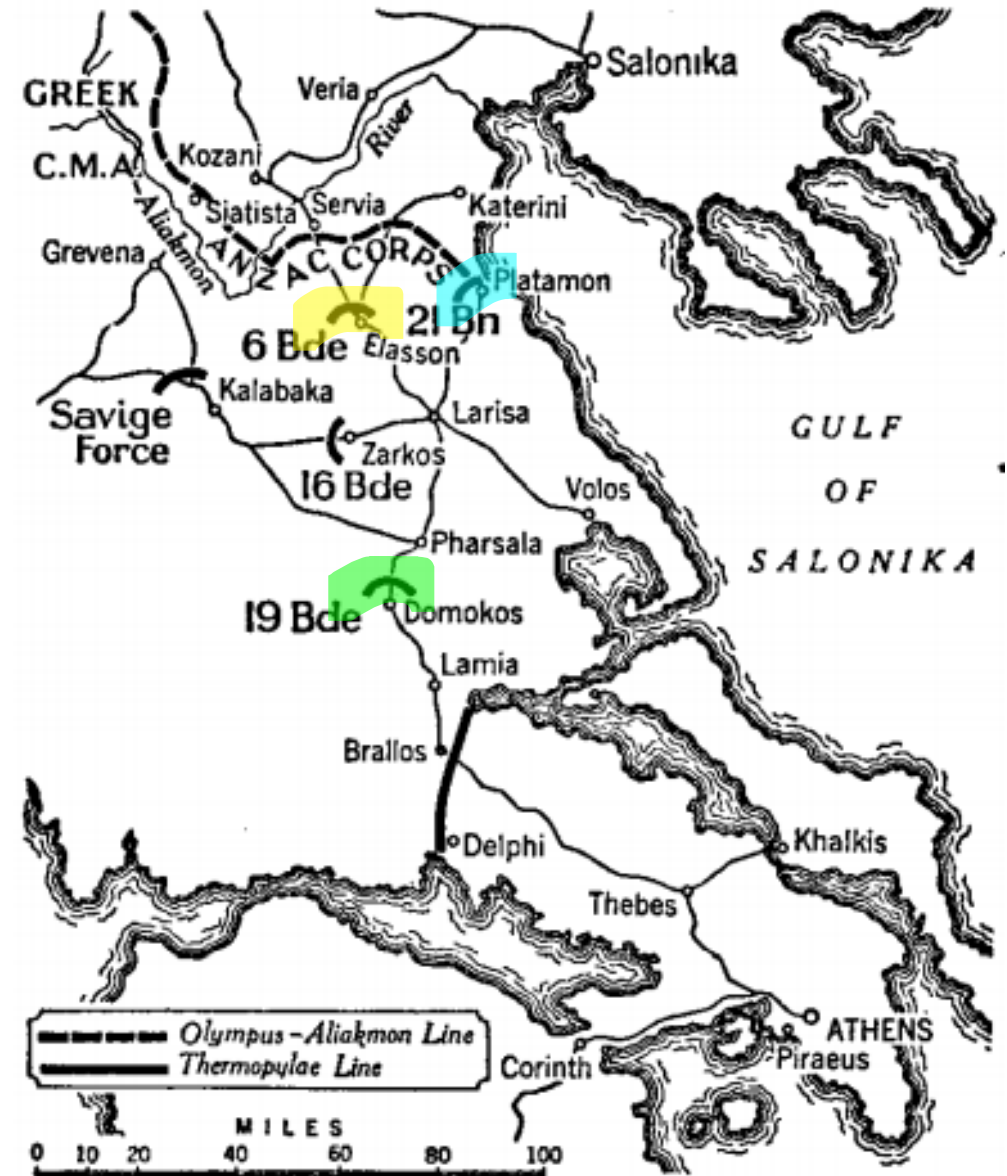
# 19 April 1941 - Libya

- The reduction in the scale and strength of enemy ground operations enabled specialist and other reserve troops to be released from emergency defensive roles for other tasks.
- Work on the **Blue Line**, the second line of defence, was again pushed forward. The mining of the line was completed on the 19th though many positions had yet to be dug.



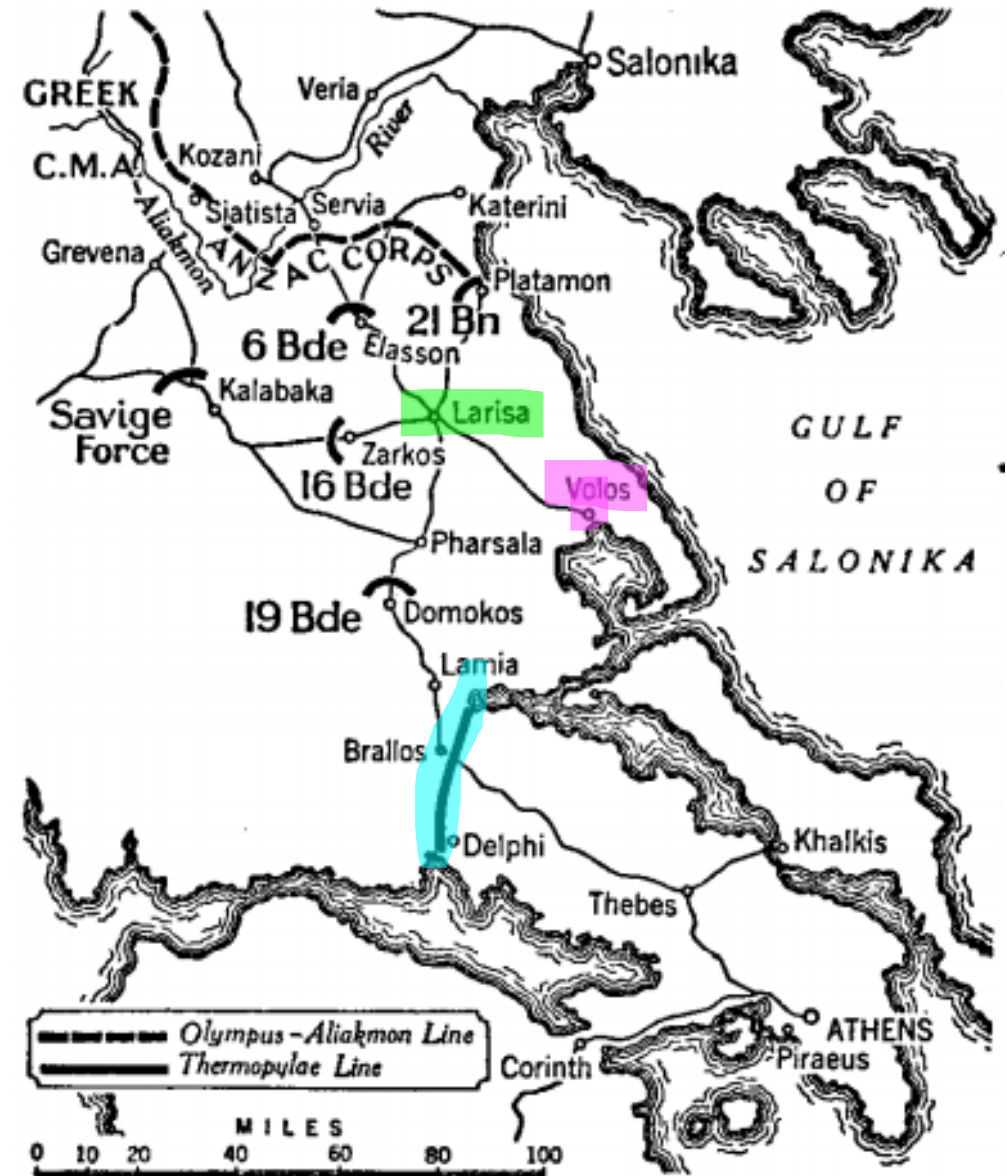
# 19 April 1941 - Greece

- At dawn, most of what remained of Allen's force was dispersed in small groups of vehicles ploughing along boggy farm tracks east of Larisa; part of it was finding its way through Volos to Lamia.
- The 21st New Zealand Battalion had been pushed into the hills above Tempe; most of the 2/2nd into the hills above Evangelismos.
- The force had carried out its orders to deny the Tempe-Sikourion road junction until 3 a.m., but a party of German troops—its strength unknown to Allen or Lamb — had moved round its left flank and cut the road to Larisa.



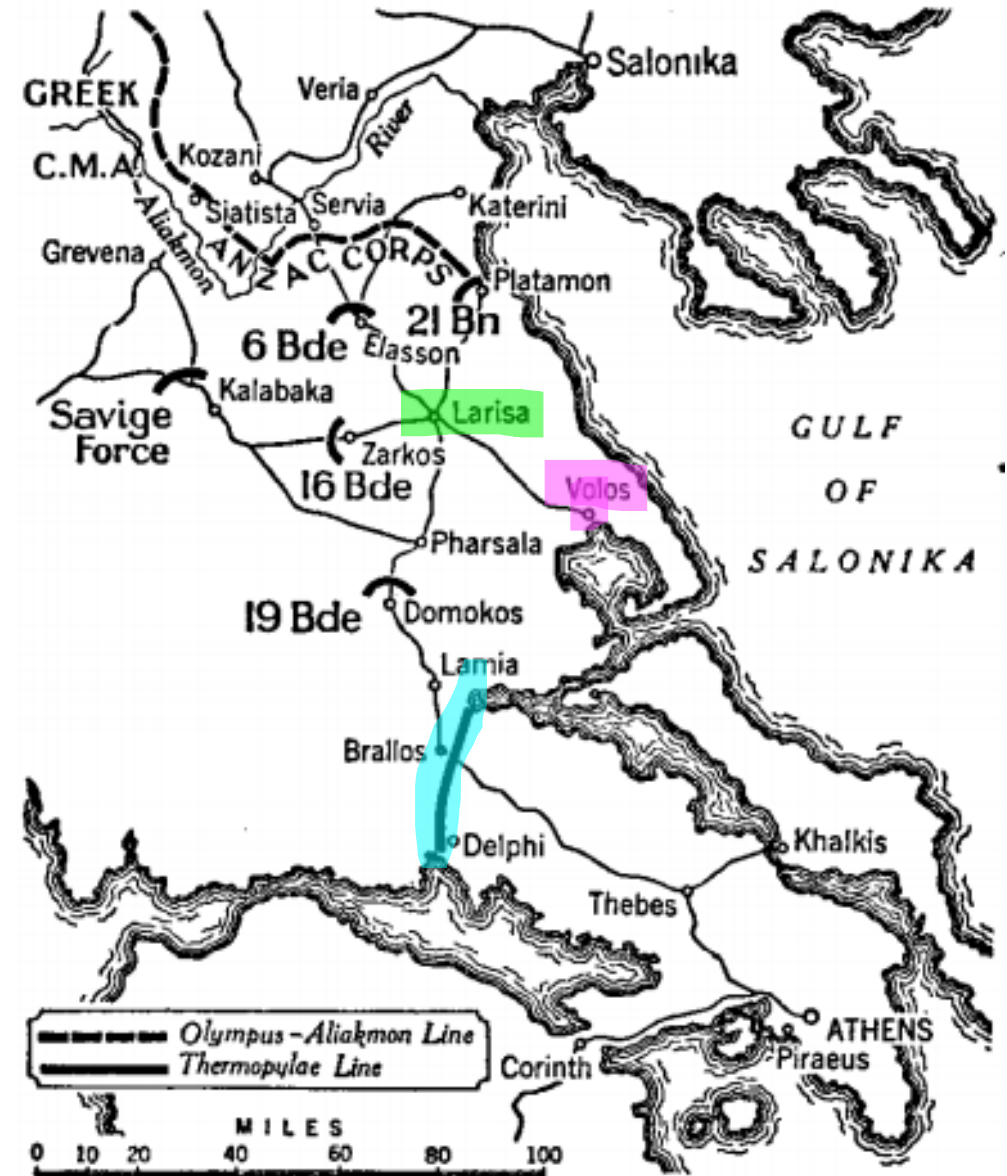
# 19 April 1941 - Greece

- The Anzac Corps had gone into position on the **Thermopylae line**. By sunrise on the 19th it had succeeded in placing some 40 to 50 miles of cratered roads and demolished bridges between itself and the German advance-guard.
- The Germans were not then in **Larisa**, where police of the 7th Australian Division's provost company were still coolly directing the few vehicles straggling behind the main columns. The 6th New Zealand Brigade group was in **Volos**; the divisional cavalry and a company of the 25th Battalion occupied a rearguard position across the roads leading into that town.
- At dawn the retreating Anzac column on the main road from Larisa to Lamia was still more than 10 miles in length, the vehicles closely spaced and an easy target for air attack. The day again was fine but, luckily for the long convoy, German aircraft did not appear in force until some hours after daylight, and by then the vehicles were moving steadily south.
- A typical experience was that of the 2/1st Battalion. At dawn it was 10 miles north of Lamia in the middle of a congested column. It did not pass through Lamia until 10 a.m.; then the column was halted under air attack on the straight road, the trucks almost head to tail and, in places, two abreast. At length the column began to move again, but it was 5 o'clock before this battalion reached its positions in the Brallos Pass.



# 19 April 1941 - Greece

- Mackay spent the 19th, from 7.30 until about 4 p.m., at the Domokos rearguard position. Lee's force had originally included two battalions — 2/6th and 2/7th — and a company of the 2/4<sup>th</sup> and one of the 2/5th, and artillery and engineers.
- At 9 p.m., Lee ordered the main portion of his force to withdraw forthwith, but organised a small rearguard to hold astride the road 10 miles farther south with instructions to delay the enemy until the last Australian and New Zealand forces had passed through Lamia.
- Colonel Lamb (2/3rd ) reached divisional headquarters near Gravia at 3 p.m. on the 19th and reported that he had not seen Allen since early that morning and did not know where the bulk of his battalion was. He established a collecting post for any more of his men who might come in at Amfiklia.
- Major Edgar, second-in command of the 2/2nd, had already established a "straggler post" between Amfiklia and Levadia and during the day 7 officers and 297 men of that unit had collected. Most of the 2/3rd Battalion's vehicles after ploughing along the tracks east of Larisa during the night made their way to Lamia either through Volos or by rejoining the main road south of Larisa.



# 19 April 1941 - Greece

- That morning (19<sup>th</sup>) it was discovered that a train-load of petrol, ammunition, gun-cotton and ammonal was standing at a railway siding two miles north of Domokos. Lt-Col Walker of the 2/7th decided that so valuable a cargo should be driven back to Athens.
- Corporal Taylor, who had made up a train at Larisa and carried the battalion back to Domokos, went forward early in the afternoon with Corporal Edwards and six other volunteers, all Victorian railwaymen, to drive the train to safety.
- A squadron of German aircraft saw the steam rising and circled overhead bombing and machine-gunning the station and train.
- Taylor was in the engine alone, with his team lying under cover awaiting his signal to jump aboard, when the trucks exploded with a shattering roar and a huge mushroom of smoke rose into the air. The blast was so powerful that men in the infantry positions two miles away felt the force of it. It thrust the engine violently along the rails, and thus its power was cushioned. Taylor survived, and, to the astonishment of those in the pass who had given the railwaymen up for dead, he arrived back at the battalion, leading his men, his hair singed but otherwise unharmed.

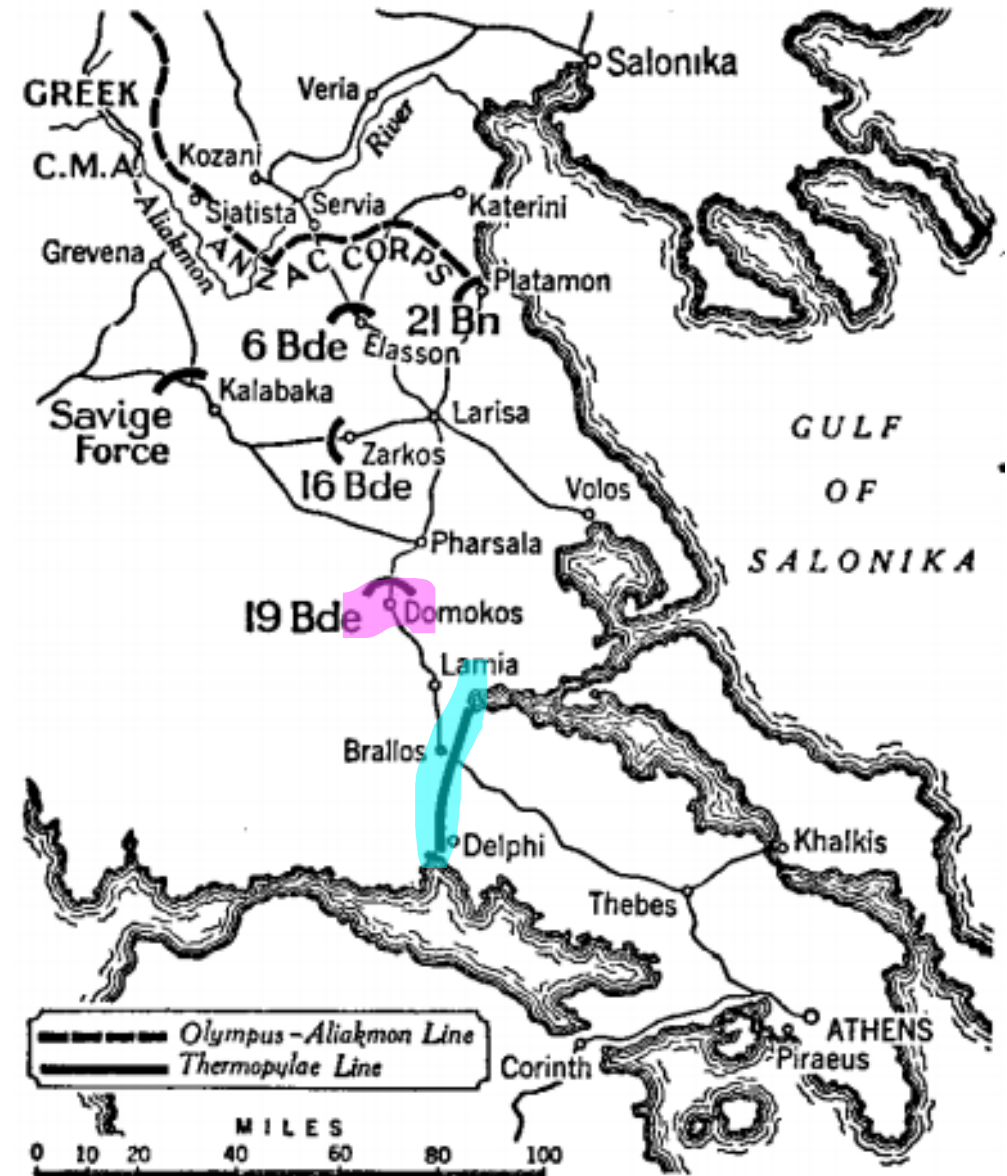
# 19 April 1941 - Greece

- In a message written at Corps headquarters late on the 19th and received by Mackay at 10.15 a.m. on the 20<sup>th</sup> Freyberg was given the task of defending the coastal pass, Mackay the Brallos.



# 20 April 1941 - Greece

- On 20<sup>th</sup> April with the support of the Bishop of Yannina, General Tsolakoglou and his two fellow corps commanders, removed General Pitsikas, the leader of the Epirus Army, from his post, and opened negotiations for surrender with the commander of the "Adolf Hitler" Division, then nearing Yannina.
- The **Thermopylai line** was too long to be defended by two divisions—as was pointed out to General Wilson by General Blamey in a message sent on the afternoon of the 20<sup>th</sup>.
- At 4.30 p.m. the small remaining rearguard south of **Domokos** received a message from Lee, stating that all New Zealand and Australian convoys had passed through Lamia, and withdrew.



# 20 April 1941 - Libya

- The 19th and 20th April produced no alarms.
- There was evidence from prisoners and from captured diaries that enemy morale was very low among Germans as well as Italians. Many prisoners taken were very hungry; some spoke of being without rations for days.
- One German diary captured at this time contained the following entry:
  - “They already have a lot of dead and wounded in the 3rd Company. It is very distressing. In their camp faces are very pale and all eyes are downcast. Their nerves are taut to breaking point.”
- Morshead wrote to Lt-Col Windeyer (photo) of the 2/48th on the 19th:
  - “My compliments to you and your battalion on the splendid show which you have put up all the week. That you have stood so firm and been so resolute has been of the utmost importance and does you all the greatest credit.”



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

016473

# 20 April 1941 - Egypt

- On 20th April No 3 Squadron RAAF were ordered to hand over all aircraft to No. 274 Squadron R.A.F. and proceed to Aboukir on leave before re-arming with Tomahawk aircraft.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P09917.002

Curtis P40 Kittyhawk/Tomahawk.

# 20 April 1941 - Mediterranean

- In the last Greek convoy, "AS.26", another tanker, British Lord (6,098 tons) was near-missed south of Gavdhos Island, and disabled.
- Vampire went alongside and removed her crew, and the abandoned ship was later taken in tow by the sloop Auckland, and reached port safely.



VIEW AFT ALONG THE IRON DECK OF THE DESTROYER HMAS VAMPIRE, AS SHE HEELS INTO A SHARP STARBOARD TURN.

# 20 April 1941 - Egypt

- There had been little activity at the frontier.
- British Intelligence had discovered that elements of the 15th German Armoured Division were on the frontier. That the rest would soon follow had to be assumed. Wavell believed that a complete division contained about 400 tanks.
- On the 20th, in two messages to London setting out the situation, he appealed to the CIGS to lend his personal assistance in meeting the threat.
- The future outlook, he said, would be one of anxiety for some time, because of his weakness in tanks, especially cruiser tanks. He had only one weak mixed tank unit in Tobruk and one squadron of cruisers at Mersa Matruh while his opponent probably had 150 tanks, of which half were medium, in the fighting line in Cyrenaica.
- The best he could hope for by the end of the month was two weak tank regiments, one of cruisers and one of infantry tanks, each less a squadron. Even by the end of May only two regiments were in sight, with no reserves to replace casualties, whereas there were now in Egypt "an excellent personnel for six tank regiments". The provision of cruiser tanks in addition to infantry tanks was vital, since infantry tanks lacked speed and the radius of action required for desert operations.

# 20 April 1941 - London

- These messages (from Wavell) stirred the British Prime Minister to action. They reached him at Ditchley on the morning of Sunday, 20th April.
- A convoy containing large armoured reinforcements was about to depart for the Middle East by the Cape. Churchill decided that the fast, tank-carrying ships in the convoy should turn off at Gibraltar and make straight for Alexandria through the Mediterranean, saving 40 days.
- He sent General Ismay, his chief staff officer, to London with a message calling the Chiefs of Staff to a conference at noon next day (Monday, 21st April).
- The war in the Middle East, Churchill stated in the message, might turn on a few hundred armoured vehicles.
  - “They must if possible be carried there at all costs . . . . General Wavell's telegram shows that machines, not men, are needed. The risk of losing the vehicles, or part of them, must be accepted. Even if half got through, the situation would be restored. The five MT ships carry 250 tanks, all but fourteen of which are "I " tanks. Every endeavour should be made to increase the numbers of cruiser tanks in this consignment. . . . The Admiralty and Air Ministry will consider and prepare this day a plan for carrying this vital convoy through the Mediterranean. Of course we must accept the risk, and no guarantee can be expected. . Speed is vital. Every day's delay must be avoided. Let me have a time-table of what is possible, observing that at 16 knots the distance is only about eight days—say, ten—from the date of sailing, viz., April 23. This would give General Wavell effective support during the first week in May.”



# 20 April 1941 - London

- General Ismay takes up the tale.
- The 20th of April was a Sunday and I had arrived at my home in Gloucestershire in the early hours of the morning hoping for a day's rest. But I was awakened by a message from the Prime Minister at Ditchley that he wanted to see me at once.
- I found him extremely disturbed by Wavell's latest reports to the effect that he was dangerously weak in tanks and that Rommel was likely to be reinforced by a German armoured division in the fairly near future.
- He thought it absolutely imperative that a large number of our best tanks should at once be sent to the Middle East direct through the Mediterranean and instructed me to place a minute to that effect, which he had already dictated, before the Chiefs of staff at once.
- My submission that it was Sunday, that the Chiefs of Staff were probably scattered all over the country and that it would be difficult to assemble them until the next morning was summarily and rightly dismissed.
  - "Are there no telephones?"
  - Are there no motor cars?"
- At this point his hostess came into the room but he forestalled her question. "
  - "Pug will not be able to stay to lunch he is starting for London at once."
- I did.



# 20 April 1941 - London

- The Chiefs of Staff met in the afternoon. They did not seem too well pleased at having their one day of rest interrupted, and at first they showed little enthusiasm for the prime minister's proposal. It was argued that the dispatch of a large number of tanks would dangerously weaken our home forces and that their passage direct through the Mediterranean would involve unwarrantable risks. By the time we adjourned for dinner no decision had been reached. But I got the impression that the Chiefs of Staff would end by opposing the project, and I was worried.
- It did not seem likely that they would press the argument about the danger of sending so many tanks out of the country, since it was fairly certain that Hitler was preparing to launch an attack on Russia and obviously could not invade us at the same time. On the other hand it seemed more than likely that they would pronounce the risks of sending the convoy direct through the Mediterranean prohibitive.
- My fears proved groundless. At the after dinner session of the committee, the Chiefs of Staff had evidently weakened on their objections as a result of discussions with their advisors. They still thought the operation proposed by the Prime Minister was very hazardous but agreed to recommend that, in view of the vital importance of providing Wavell with an immediate reinforcement of armour the risks should be accepted.



- Thanks for your attention