THE
BALKAN CAMPAIGN
1940-1941

DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY ART AND ENGINEERING
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY
WEST POINT, NEW YORK
1948
FOREWORD

This account of the campaign in the Balkans has been written for use in the instruction of cadets at the United States Military Academy. It is based for the most part on material prepared by the Military Intelligence Service, War Department. However, while acknowledging the great indebtedness to the M. I. S., it is not desired to place on it the responsibility for any factual errors, or for any conclusions drawn.

November 1941
INTRODUCTION (MAP 1)

Italy’s entry into World War II on 10 June 1940 opened a vast new theater of operations—the Mediterranean area. During its first year the war had been fought in central and northern Europe, the center of gravity moving successively from Poland to Finland to Norway to France. Italy’s participation, plus the fact that the British Isles did not succumb to the German aerial bombardment after the fall of France, turned the attention of the belligerents to the Mediterranean Sea, where Great Britain became involved in a grim struggle to maintain her supremacy.

The Balkans and North Africa were soon focal points of military activity in the Mediterranean theater, and operations in those two areas furnish excellent studies of modern war in two types of terrain, mountain and desert. The two campaigns proceeded simultaneously for a while and had a profound influence on one another. Consequently the necessity of describing them separately must not hide the fact that each was a part of the great struggle for control of the Mediterranean and its surrounding shores.

The Balkan campaign, which will be discussed in these pages, may be divided into three phases: the Italo-Greek War, the invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece, and the conquest of Crete.

ITALO-GREEK WAR

GENERAL SITUATION (MAP 1)

At the time of the Italian invasion of Greece on 28 October 1940, Britain’s military position was being seriously threatened at all points. The British Isles were being bombed by the German Air Force. In North Africa, British troops had withdrawn from the border of western Egypt as Marshal Graziani’s advance, initiated 13 September, moved toward the Suez Canal. In East Africa,
British troops had been forced to evacuate British Somaliland on 20-21 August.

Because of Britain's weakness and the collapse of France, Italy's position in Africa was now excellent. Libya was no longer threatened from the west, and the Italians had secured Djibuti. As noted, they had started an advance on the Suez Canal from Libya, although by 28 October this drive had been halted to permit the improvement of supply lines and the construction of an advance base. From Ethiopia they could, if desired, send a second column toward the canal. Such then was Italy's situation when she began her fight with Greece.

There was a close parallel between the position of Greece in the Mediterranean and that of Norway in the area around the British Isles. An Italian occupation of Greece would offer bases for a more effective attack against Egypt. While Graziani was building up his strength for continuing the thrust by land, Italian air and naval forces based on Greece and the island of Crete could conduct operations from the north, thus forcing a further dispersion of British strength. On the other hand, an Italian invasion of Greece would give the British the opportunity to come in and establish themselves on the continent of Europe. Moreover, from Greek bases they could operate most effectively against the Italian Navy, which had thus far refused to come out and fight.

OPPOSING FORCES (MAP 2a)

The population of Greece is seven million, as compared to Italy's forty-three million. The latter's forces, however, were dispersed over a great theater of war, and for purposes of comparison only the Italian troops in Albania should be considered.

General Sebastiano Visconti-Prasca, the Italian commander in Albania, had ten divisions totaling about 125,000 men. There were also about 25,000 corps and special troops and 12,000 Albanians, making a total force of approximately 162,000. Of the ten Italian divisions in Albania, two were located in the north to guard against Yugoslav intervention. One division was in GHQ reserve, and the remaining seven were divided between the Ninth and Eleventh Armies. These two armies occupied, respectively, the northern and southern portions of the Albanian-Greek frontier.

To oppose this force, the Greek Regular Army, under General Papagos, numbered some 150,000 men. Greece was capable of mobilizing enough reserves to bring the total to 500,000, but did not have sufficient equipment with which to arm them.
The main hope of the Greeks in resisting the Italian invasion was the difficult mountainous terrain along the Albanian border. This natural defensive line was strengthened by construction of earthworks, pillboxes, and tank traps, with particular attention being paid to strategic passes where the roads cross the mountains.

THE ITALIAN PLAN

There were only four roads from Albania into Greece. One led from Koritza to Florina, and another followed the coastline from Porto Edda to Philiatais, where it turned inland to Janina. Between these were two roads that crossed the border at points some twenty miles apart and joined together about fifteen miles inside Greek territory. From their junction a good highway led to Janina.

Military observers report that the Greek Army was disposed to resist an attack on Florina and that it was even expected that an Italian flanking movement might be made through Monastir, in Yugoslavia. Apparently the Greeks anticipated that the Italians would make their main drive toward Salonika, using Florina as an advance base (Map 2b). However, Janina was another possible objective. Its capture would place the Italians in position to launch a main attack on Larissa and cut Greece in half. The road net favored an attack toward Janina, and the Italians chose to make this their main effort.

Just as the Russians in 1939 expected the immediate capitulation of the Finns, so the Italians counted on the surrender of the Greeks without a struggle. An observer who was in Rome states that there is good reason to believe the attack was ordered by Mussolini against the advice of his general staff and was based on the assumption that the Greeks would not resist. The Italians, like the Russians in Finland, advanced with little regard for security measures, indicating that their plans were based on an estimate of enemy intentions rather than capabilities. In Norway the Germans gave a demonstration of a successful mechanized attack in extremely mountainous terrain, and in Albania the Italians demonstrated the failure of a similar operation.

The campaign in Albania may be divided into two phases, a brief Italian offensive and an extended Greek counteroffensive.

OPERATIONS

Italian Offensive (Map 2a).—At 3:00 A.M., 28 October 1940, Italy delivered an ultimatum to Greece that demanded the right to occupy certain strategic points in that country. Three hours was
given for an answer, but at 5:30 A.M., before the expiration of the
time limit, Italian troops attacked along the four roads leading
across the border. During the first few days the Italians made the
gains that were expected of them. In the north they succeeded in
reaching the Florina-Kastoria road and sent out spearheads toward
both towns. The Greeks moved to stop this drive by attacking the
enemy supply lines, just as the Finns had done when the Russian
columns started across northern Finland. Apparently using little-
known mountain trails, the Greeks advanced to the hills surrounding
Koritza and began shelling the town. This advance base of the
northern drive is surrounded by high mountains, the retention of
which is essential to its defense. A Greek detachment that suc-
cceeded in establishing itself in the mountains accomplished its
mission of delaying the enemy advance. Despite the fact that the
Italians soon regained possession of the heights around Koritza, the
momentum of their advance had been lost, and Greek counterattacks
soon had their columns moving back over the roads into Albania.

The main attack toward Janina likewise had an initial success.
The columns moving from Porto Edda and Argirocastro broke
through the fortifications along the mountainous border and reached
the valley of the Kalamas River. Here they established a bridge-
head and were preparing to continue their advance when they were
struck by the Greek counteroffensive. An Italian thrust from Klis-
ura up the valley of the Voiussa River also succeeded in penetrating
the Greek defenses, spearheads being directed toward Koritza and
Janina.

On 9 November, when General Visconti-Prasca was replaced by
General Soddu, the Italians had been fighting almost two weeks, but
their achievements were far short of what they had hoped for. This
was the first real test of the Italian soldier since World War I.
His fighting in Ethiopia in 1936 must be discounted because of the
kind of opposition encountered. In Spain it was difficult to judge
his caliber, and during the summer of 1940 Italy did not attack
France until the French Army had practically collapsed. The re-
placement of General Visconti-Prasca was public admission of the
fact that the Italian Army's accomplishments in Greece were not up
to expectations.

**Greek Counteroffensive (Map 2a).**—By mid-November the Greeks
had taken the initiative from the enemy at all points. The first great
success was the capture of Koritza on 22 November. The Greeks
quite properly did not launch an assault on the town itself until they
had first established themselves on all the surrounding heights.
When this was accomplished, Koritza became untenable, and the Italians were forced to retreat toward Pogradets and Moskopole. The loss of Koritza was a major defeat for the Italian forces, since a lateral road made it a suitable base for a drive on either Florina or Janina. Furthermore, Koritza was the only advance air base of the Italian Army. Other airfields were back at Tirana, Durazzo, and Valona. Further important results of the fall of Koritza were its effect on the morale of the opposing forces and the supplies which the Greeks succeeded in capturing. Enough small arms and ammunition to equip two divisions, as well as field artillery pieces, antiaircraft guns, tanks, trucks, and large stores of foodstuffs, were taken.

After the capture of Koritza the Greeks continued their advance toward the inland bases of Elbasan and Tirana. By 9 December, Pogradets was in their hands. The Italians then moved their left flank back to Lake Ochrida and established a line that ran behind the Shkumin River to Elbasan. South of that town they stopped a Greek drive near the northern bend of the Devoll River.

In the southern sector, the Greek counteroffensive was directed toward Porto Edda and the advance base at Tepelini, which was supplied from the important port of Valona. On 6 December, the Greeks captured Porto Edda and continued their advance along the seacoast toward Valona. On 23 December, Himarra was taken, but Italian resistance then stiffened and further advance along the coast was halted.

Two Greek columns advanced on Tepelini, one down the valley of the Dhrina River and the other through Klisura. Both eventually reached positions from which the artillery could shell the Italian positions around Tepelini, but the city itself was never captured. The British, in the meantime, were bombing the base at Valona.

On 13 January, General Caballero, chief of the Italian general staff, relieved General Soddu in Albania. This replacement marks the beginning of an Italian effort to regain ground lost during the Greek offensive. By 1 February, the Italians had launched strong counterattacks along the front, especially in the north toward Koritza. The severity of the winter weather and the determination of the Greek defenders, however, nullified the efforts, and the line became stabilized.

 Shortly thereafter the German “peaceful” penetration into Hungary and Rumania and reports of large troop movements north of the Danube indicated that help was coming to the Italian armies bogged down in Albania. The Greeks had hopes of pushing the enemy into the sea, but the extension of their lines of communication
and the consequent difficulties of supply prevented the fulfillment of those hopes. Furthermore, the Italians were falling back on their communications and were approaching terrain where they could make more effective use of their mechanized strength. The death of Premier Metaxas in early February had been a blow to the Greeks, and may have contributed to the slowing up of their counteroffensive.

In a final effort to bring the war to a close before Germany should intervene, the Italians launched an offensive all along the line on 12 March. This attack lasted for six days, with only insignificant gains. The failure here was overshadowed by German intervention, which came with lightning rapidity on 6 April.

The Italians are reported to have had twenty divisions in Albania by early March; two facing Yugoslavia, fourteen facing the Greeks, and four in reserve. The Greeks by this time had mobilized at least 300,000 men. They had twenty divisions, sixteen of which were in Albania.

The line of battle on 1 March, which marked the maximum Greek gains, extended from a point on the coast between Valona and Himarra east to Tepelini, thence north to the Shkumin River near Elbasan and east to Lake Ochrida. As a result of the Italian offensive of mid-March, and also because the Greeks desired to release divisions from Albania, this line was somewhat shortened by 6 April. It then ran almost straight from Himarra to Pogradets.

COMMENTS

The failure of Italy to overcome Greece was one of the great surprises of World War II. With an army that was fully equipped and well supplied, and backed by superior air and naval power, the Italians were expected to overrun their weak neighbor within a short time. From the small force originally concentrated in Albania, it is apparent that Mussolini did not expect strong opposition. At no time did the Italians have the superiority in combat power necessary to overcome the fierce Greek resistance. Not only did they fail to conquer Greece, but for a time they were in danger of losing the important southern seaports and of being forced to retreat to northern Albania.

The British gave as much help as possible to the Greek Army. Despite the assumption of the offensive in North Africa on 9 December, they were able to send considerable quantities of supplies to their allies. The efforts of the Italian Air Force were in many cases nullified by the counteractivity of the R.A.F. At sea the British Mediterranean fleet attempted to draw the Italian fleet into combat,
and when the latter refused to come out and fight, the British attacked it in its harbors. One of the great naval victories of the war was won by the British on 11 November when they attacked the Italian fleet in the harbor of Taranto (Map 2b).

Other contributing causes to the Italian defeat were the weather and the terrain. The time chosen for the attack was the season of heavy rains. The rivers of Albania were in flood, and the poor roads were made worse by the mud. In some cases the Greeks built dams to divert mountain streams into the path of the enemy. The Italian advantage in mechanized equipment was nullified not only by the weather but also by Greek ingenuity in mountain warfare. The superior Italian Air Force was grounded for a large part of the time by the severity of the weather.

Greek resistance to the Italian invasion strengthened for the time being Britain's position in the Mediterranean. It enabled the British to establish themselves in Crete, thus giving added protection to the Suez Canal. The Italian setback in Greece, together with General Wavell's counterattack against Marshal Graziani in North Africa in December, removed temporarily the threat to British control of the Mediterranean, which appeared so serious in September of 1940.

**INVASION OF YUGOSLAVIA AND GREECE**

**GENERAL SITUATION (MAP 1)**

On 6 April the German Army opened its 1941 campaign by attacking Yugoslavia and Greece. On 9 April of the preceding year, Germany had attacked Norway, and the similarity of the two campaigns extends beyond that of the opening dates. It has already been mentioned that Greece bore a strategic resemblance in the Mediterranean to that held by Norway in the vicinity of the British Isles. Furthermore, when Germany occupied Norway she immediately became a threat to the British Isles. This served as a strategic feint, masking her real intention to attack France and the Low Countries. In 1941, the German drive into the Balkans likewise served as a strategic feint toward the Suez Canal to mask Hitler's real plan for that year—the invasion of Russia. The similarity may be extended by noting that the German excuse for the Balkan campaign was British interference in the Italo-Greek War, just as her excuse for the occupation of Norway was the pretended fear of British occupation of the Scandinavian peninsula. From her own viewpoint, Germany in both cases prevented the establishment of a British foothold on the continent of Europe.
The diplomatic maneuvers which preceded military operations in the Balkans included the bloodless occupation of Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria, and an effort to secure Yugoslavia in a similar manner. Hungary and Rumania had fallen easily into German hands. On 1 March her troops crossed the Danube into Bulgaria without resistance, and the impending campaign became obvious. Then followed an effort to force the Yugoslavs to submit without military conquest. Yugoslavia capitulated to German demands on 25 March, but the people became so aroused that the government was overthrown by a coup d'état. General Simovitch, who then came into power, repudiated the action of the former government and the Yugoslavs decided to fight. This was hailed as a great victory for the anti-German forces, but was to prove less advantageous than first supposed.

The general situation in other parts of the Mediterranean theater must be understood in order to place the campaign in the Balkans in proper perspective. British forces had achieved an astounding success in North Africa in December of 1940, but those gains were now being wiped out. On 10 January, a British convoy under the protection of cruisers and the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* had been attacked by dive bombers when passing the island of Pantelleria. A cruiser and a destroyer were sunk, and the *Illustrious* was severely damaged. This incident marked a change in the complexion of the North African campaign. The British Navy lost control of the central Mediterranean, and the Germans were able to send troops with mechanized equipment to the assistance of the Italian forces in Libya. Beginning 25 March, the rejuvenated Axis forces in North Africa, now under General Rommel, began a drive that was advancing rapidly toward Egypt when the Germans opened their attack on the Balkans on 6 April. The withdrawal of British troops from Libya to Greece had given Rommel his opportunity.

In East Africa the situation was more favorable to Great Britain. In February 1941, the Italian East African troops were attacked by British columns converging from Kenya and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. By 6 April, this campaign was proceeding favorably for the British forces.

Another factor in favor of Great Britain was the growing concern of the United States. Colonel William J. Donovan had visited the Balkans in January and February of 1941 as the personal representative of the President, who on 11 March signed the Lend-Lease Act. This assured aid to all countries fighting the Axis.

The naval situation in the Mediterranean had been improved late in March when the British Mediterranean fleet, aided by units of the
Greek Navy and the Royal Air Force, encountered elements of the Italian Navy off Cape Matapan in the Ionian Sea. The Italians admitted the loss of three cruisers and two destroyers. This victory, together with that at Taranto in November of 1940, had materially reduced Italy’s naval strength.

TERRAIN (MAP 2b)

A knowledge of the important features of the terrain is necessary to an understanding of the campaign in the Balkans. Northern Yugoslavia is a land of broad rivers, of which the Danube and its principal tributaries, the Drave and Save, are the largest. On the Bulgarian frontier is a rugged mountain chain. Nish, Skoplje (Uskub), and Sofia are on a triangular crest at the headwaters of three rivers, the Morava, the Vardar, and the Maritza. The main gap in the mountains between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria is Dragoman Pass, at the headwaters of the Morava and the Maritza between Sofia and Nish. There are three other gaps farther south which will be referred to later. A mountain pass between the headwaters of the Morava and Vardar Rivers forms a part of the north-south “trench” which runs from Belgrade to Salonika.

Along the northern Greek border, facing Albania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria, is a continuous mountain chain (Map 3). The roads leading into Albania have already been referred to. Between Yugoslavia and Greece there are two gateways, the Monastir Gap and the Vardar Valley.

The mountains along the Bulgarian border are cut by two rivers, the Struma and Nestos. The more important is the Struma, which comes through the mountains at Rupel. Both of these passes were well defended by strong bunkers of the Metaxas Line.

Important terrain features south of the northern mountain chain are the Vistritsa River, Mount Olympus, the Pindus Mountains, the plain of Thessaly, the pass at Thermopylae, and the Isthmus of Corinth, which is cut by a canal. The Peloponnesus is a dangling peninsula south of the Gulf of Corinth.

OPPOSING FORCES (MAP 2b)

The German forces poised for the Balkan invasion were in two principal masses, one in southwestern Hungary and the other in western Bulgaria. The force in Bulgaria was the Twelfth Army, under the command of List. It consisted of four corps commanded by Hartman, Bohme, Stumme, and von Kleist. Hartman’s corps
contained three infantry divisions. Bohme had two mountain divisions, one panzer division, and one infantry division. Stumme's corps contained two panzer divisions, one motorized infantry division, and an SS division called "Adolph Hitler".* The exact composition of the von Kleist corps is unknown, but it is believed to have contained two panzer divisions, two motorized divisions, and one mountain division. This makes a total of sixteen divisions in List's Twelfth Army, including five panzer divisions. Of this total only eleven divisions are reported to have seen action. Hartman's corps is not identified in any of the accounts of operations that are available. It was probably an unused reserve.

The German force in southwestern Hungary was the Second Army of von Weichs. The exact composition of this army is unknown, but it is believed to have consisted of three corps, of which two went into action. It has been reported that thirty-two German divisions were provided for the Balkan campaign and that twenty-one saw action. Deducting List's divisions in the south, we may assume that the German forces moving on Yugoslavia from the north consisted of sixteen divisions, of which ten saw action. The forces to the north included not only von Weichs' Second Army, but also a corps of two or three divisions, which was assembled south of the Timisul River in Rumania. This force will be called the Timisul corps in the discussion that follows.

Germany's principal ally, Italy, had three armies in the field. Behind the Julian Alps was the Italian Second Army, under Ambrosio, which had three infantry, two motorized, and three armored divisions. In Albania there were the twenty divisions of the Italian Ninth and Eleventh Armies that had been in heavy combat with the Greeks throughout the period of German preparation.

There were no Rumanian or Bulgarian troops involved in the campaign, but a Hungarian army was waiting between the Danube and Tiza Rivers, ready to cross and reclaim the territory lost to Yugoslavia after World War I.

On the opposite side were the combined armies of Yugoslavia, Greece, and Great Britain. The Yugoslav Army, according to Italian sources, consisted of about thirty infantry divisions, three cavalry divisions, and ten reinforced infantry brigades. These troops were spread out in a cordon defense all around Yugoslavia's long border. However, this cordon defense was only one of the weaknesses of the

* The SS (Schultz-Staffel) divisions of the German Army were primarily Nazi party organizations. They represented an expansion of Hitler's personal bodyguard and took such names as "Adolph Hitler", "Reich", etc.
Yugoslav Army. None of the units were adequately equipped, and some of them were disloyal, especially those made up of Croats. There had been internal dissension between the Serbs and Croats ever since the formation of the Yugoslav state after World War I.

Of the twenty Greek divisions in existence on 6 April 1941, all but four were fighting in Albania. Of these four, one was on the Bulgarian border and three were in the vicinity of Florina, apparently placed there to defend the Monastir Gap. One report indicates that these three divisions were under British command. In addition to the mobile divisions, the Greeks had fortress troops in the Metaxas Line (Map 3).

The British force in the Balkans, under the command of General Henry Maitland Wilson, included the 6th Australian Division, the 2d New Zealand Division, and an armored brigade. The total strength was about 40,000. Since the Greeks would not allow their ally to land troops until the Germans had crossed the Danube, the first British troops did not arrive until 2 March. They went into position west of the Vardar River.

ALLIED PLANS (MAP 2b)

Throughout the winter of 1940-41 the Greeks were anticipating an invasion by German troops. They were not counting much on British help at that time, knowing that the latter were busily occupied in other spheres, but nevertheless they intended to put up the strongest possible resistance. Early Greek plans were based on two premises: first, that the Italians would be driven from Albania before the Germans struck; and, second, that the neutrality of Yugoslavia would close the Vardar River Valley. When it became obvious that the Italians could not be driven from Albania, the plan was changed. It was then decided to shorten the front in Albania and detach divisions to join up with the British left flank. Although the line was shortened, the Greeks found it impossible to detach as many divisions as intended.

The British entered the Balkan peninsula with two objectives in mind. First, they sought to prevent German occupation of Greek air bases; and, second, they hoped to strengthen the Greek and Yugoslav governments in their determination to resist German invasion. The most optimistic saw the formation of an Allied toehold on the continent of Europe which might later be developed into a drive for victory up the valley of the Danube. The least optimistic foresaw merely a disruption of the German timetable of conquest by forcing Hitler to fight for the Balkans.
THE GERMAN PLAN (MAP 2b)

The German plan of operations may be divided into two phases, both of which proceeded simultaneously. The northern phase involved the capture of Zagreb and Belgrade and the defeat of the Yugoslav armies north and northwest of Nish. This part of the plan was entrusted to von Weichs' Second Army, the Timisul corps in Rumania, and von Kleist's corps of List's Twelfth Army. The troops opposite Yugoslavia's northern frontier were to advance directly toward Zagreb and Belgrade while von Kleist approached from the rear via Dragoman Pass, Nish, and the valley of the Morava River.

The objectives of the southern phase of the German plan, executed by the corps of Stumme and Bohme of List's Twelfth Army, were the occupation of southern Yugoslavia and the break-through into northern Greece. Thereafter the German troops in the south were to drive on to Athens, forcing the surrender of the Greeks and the evacuation or surrender of the British.

The grand strategic movement of the German armies may be considered as a penetration toward Nish and Skoplje to divide the Yugoslavs from the Greco-British forces and then an envelopment of both the northern and southern wings. It was a repetition in miniature of the campaign in the West, with the Battle of France and the Battle of Flanders proceeding simultaneously.

The Hungarian contribution may be neglected, as far as any decisive help is concerned. The Italians limited themselves to the occupation of the Yugoslav coastline along the Adriatic Sea.

OPERATIONS

The operations can best be described by dividing them into three phases: first, the break-through; second, the campaign in northern Yugoslavia; and, third, the operations in southern Yugoslavia and Greece.

The Break-through (Map 3).—Keeping in mind the similarity of the strategic patterns of the German invasion of the Balkans and the campaign in the West, the break-through operation in the Balkans corresponded to the drive made by the von Kleist Group in France across the Meuse at Sedan and thence westward to Abbeville. In addition to the gap at Dragoman Pass, there are three others to the south. A railroad had been built through one of these passes, from Kustendil to Skoplje. Farther south there is a break in the mountains opposite Carevo-Selo, near the headwaters of the Bregnalitza River. The third passageway is the valley of the Strumitia
River, just north of the Greek frontier. The Germans did not confine their efforts to a single pass but made use of every one available. Napoleon did the same in his advance across the Alps prior to the Battle of Marengo.

The German drive up the valley of the Strumitza River, although part of the break-through into the Vardar Valley, was more closely associated with the operations against the Metaxas Line and will be discussed later. Of the three drives toward Nish, Skoplje, and Veles, the two in the south were begun at dawn on 6 April, and the one toward Nish did not start until the morning of the 8th, two days later. The reason for this time interval has not been explained. Perhaps it was hoped that the drives toward Skoplje and Veles would draw Yugoslav troops to the south and weaken the resistance at Dragoman Pass.

The force assigned to the column moving on Skoplje consisted of a panzer division and the SS division (motorized). The column moved out at dawn, 6 April. No resistance was encountered until the town of Stracin was reached. Here the advance mechanized elements of the panzer division came to a halt and called upon the division's infantry component to come forward and clear the way. One rifle battalion moved up and engaged in a fierce fight with what was estimated as a regiment of Yugoslavs. The struggle lasted four hours. The Yugoslavs even attempted a counterattack after the Germans had fought their way through. It was probably evening by the time the Yugoslav position at Stracin had been broken through, but the Skoplje column did not stop. During the night it continued its advance toward Kumanovo, the panzer division in front and the SS division in the rear. Bridges and roads had to be repaired as the column advanced. Even where bridges had not been destroyed, they had to be strengthened to carry the heavy loads of the mechanized force.

At 5:00 P.M. on 7 April, the second day of the campaign, the advance guard of the panzer division reached Skoplje. It had traveled sixty miles in two days through enemy resistance in terrain that would have been almost impossible to negotiate if properly defended.

While the panzer and SS divisions were crossing the mountains at Stracin, a motorized infantry division was advancing on Veles. This unit encountered resistance at Carevo-Selo, but had forced its way through by 10:30 A.M. By the evening of 7 April the advance guard of the motorized division had reached Veles, and the breakthrough to the Vardar River was complete. This, of course, does not mean that all of the Yugoslav troops assigned to defend the Bul-
garian border had been defeated. Most of them had not yet had an opportunity to fight.

The force assigned to the thrust toward Nish was the von Kleist corps, which, as already noted, is believed to have contained two panzer divisions, two motorized divisions and a mountain division. There is evidence to indicate that the mountain division led the column as far as Pirot and cleared the way through Dragoman Pass. Thereafter the advance continued at a rapid rate. Nish was occupied on 9 April, the second day of the advance.

The fall of Nish was a severe blow to Yugoslavia. Apparently it came as a complete surprise. Inasmuch as the usual route for an invasion of Yugoslavia was across the Danube River in the north, the mass of Yugoslav troops was concentrated in that area. About six divisions had been assigned to the defense of the Bulgarian frontier and apparently had been expected to handle any German drive there. As it turned out, the fall of Nish placed the Yugoslav Army in the same position as the Allied armies had been in Flanders when Abbeville fell. Instead of retreating to the sea, the Yugoslavs withdrew to the mountains in the west.

The occupation of Nish on 9 April and the fall of Skoplje, which did not occur until the 10th, completed the break-through to the Morava-Vardar line. Thereafter the operations continued in two separate spheres, as already indicated. Inasmuch as resistance in the north was broken sooner than that in the south, it is convenient to describe the operations that led to the final conquest of Yugoslavia before discussing the invasion of Greece.

Final Conquest of Yugoslavia (Map 2b).—The German units involved in the final conquest of Yugoslavia were the Second Army of von Weichs, the Timisul corps in southern Rumania, and the von Kleist corps, whose advance to Nish has already been described. Von Weichs' army made two main thrusts, one toward Zagreb and the other down the valley of the Save River toward Belgrade. The Timisul and von Kleist corps advanced directly on Belgrade.

After moving through Dragoman Pass to Nish, the von Kleist corps was in position either to advance to the north and aid von Weichs in the conquest of Yugoslavia, or to turn to the south and assist the corps of Stumme and Bohme in the conquest of Greece. However, the German plan called for von Kleist to go to the north. Minor resistance was encountered at Yagodina on 10 April and at Kragujevac on the following day. It was not until Mt. Avalon was reached that any major resistance developed. Here, within sight of Belgrade, a battle was fought that lasted for thirty-six hours. In
this battle the German foot troops were supported by dive bombers. On 13 April, all obstacles south of Belgrade having been overcome, von Kleist approached the Yugoslav capital and accepted its surrender.

The Timisul corps had moved across the border early 9 April, with Belgrade as its objective, and on the 10th its leading elements had reached the Danube opposite the city and had halted to await the arrival of the remainder of the corps. On the afternoon of 12 April a young captain with nine men from this group had penetrated the city and, making superb use of Napoleonic bluff, had demanded and had practically obtained the surrender of the garrison.

This completes the account of two drives on Belgrade; the third was made by one of von Weichs’ corps. This corps did not launch its attack until 10 April. It crossed two rivers, the Drave and Save, and reached positions southwest of Belgrade on the 12th. It thus appears that the city was completely surrounded by 12 April, all units having arrived there about the same time.

In addition to the three drives on Belgrade, the German operations in Yugoslavia included the advance of another corps of von Weichs’ army on Zagreb. This corps also moved out on 10 April. By the 11th it had occupied Zagreb and on the following day reached Sisac and Bihac. One column was sent west to Karvolac, where it made contact with the Italian Second Army advancing south along the Adriatic coast. From Sisac the main drive was continued south to Sarajevo.

The only remaining operations in northern Yugoslavia were those of Germany’s allies, Italy and Hungary. Ambrosio’s Second Army crossed the Julian Alps on 10 April and started its drive down the coast. By 17 April this army had advanced as far as Ragusa. Here it met Italian units from Albania, which had driven north along the coast. Hungary’s troops moved across the border and occupied the portion of Yugoslavia north of the Danube River that had been taken from her after the last war. The Hungarian occupation had been accomplished by 15 April.

The rapid drives into Yugoslavia had cut the country to pieces. The speed of the German advance shows that they were able to knife their way into the interior almost without opposition. The thirty Yugoslav divisions did not even have a chance to fight. After the fall of Nish, Skoplje, Belgrade, and Zagreb further organized resistance was impossible. On 15 April, negotiations for capitulation were begun, and on the 17th the unconditional surrender of all Yugoslav forces took place.
The Conquest of Greece (Map 3).—The German operations south of the strategic break-through into the valley of the Vardar may be divided into two phases: first, the defeat of Greek forces east of the Vardar; and, second, the defeat of the combined British and Greek forces between the Vardar and Albania. The first operation was assigned to Bohme's corps, which planned an envelopment via the Strumitza and Vardar Valleys to Salonika. At the same time other units of this corps were to attack frontally along the northern Greek border east of the Vardar, with the main effort at Rupel Pass.

The Greek strength in this area amounted to about 15,000 men, only one division plus the fortress troops of the Metaxas Line. If forced from their positions east of the Vardar, they planned to execute delaying action while falling back to a new line west of the river, where the British were organizing a position from Ekaterini to Edessa. The Greeks, however, did not take into account a German advance through Yugoslavia, and we shall see how that unexpected development upset the plan.

Bohme's corps moved to the attack about 5:00 A.M., 6 April. During the first two days heavy attacks were made on the Rupel Pass position and toward Xanthi and Komotini. The latter two thrusts broke through the Metaxas Line, by-passing Greek fortifications, which continued to hold out for some time. At Rupel Pass, however, the Germans made no progress. For two days they brought everything they had to bear on the Greek fortifications. Dive-bombers, assault troops, flame throwers, and high-velocity antitank and antiaircraft guns were used in an attempt that matched the German attacks on the Maginot Line; but the Greek positions held.

On the third day, 8 April, the Greeks learned that a panzer division, probably followed by a motorized infantry division, was moving down the valley of the Vardar. This, of course, was Bohme's enveloping force. It had set out on the morning of the 6th and had labored over bad roads through the Strumitza Valley into Yugoslavia, meeting practically no resistance. One small engagement is reported to have taken place near Strumitza. Sometime during the day of 8 April the panzer division of the enveloping force routed some Greek light mechanized units near Kilkis. Except for this brief encounter, the Germans met no Greek opposition in their drive to Salonika, which they reached and occupied on 9 April.

The German capture of Salonika sealed the fate of the 15,000 Greek troops east of the Vardar River. The successful defense of Rupel Pass was in vain. A German officer approached the defenders under a white flag and suggested that they surrender to prevent
further bloodshed. When the Greeks refused, he asked them to telephone Salonika. The authorities there likewise recommended surrender, and on 10 April all the Greek forces east of the Vardar laid down their arms. Bohme's corps was now in position to turn west and assault the British.

In the meantime a much wider envelopment than that down the Vardar Valley was in the process of execution. This was the movement of Stumme's corps to Monastir Gap. This corps, it will be remembered, had made the original penetration to Skoplje and Veles. On 10 April, the day after the fall of Salonika, advance elements of the SS division appeared at Florina.

The British position from Ekaterini to Edessa was now in danger of encirclement, and the original Greco-British plan, which had not anticipated such a rapid German advance through Yugoslavia, had to be revised to take care of the new situation. Instead of holding the line Ekaterini-Edessa-Florina-Koritza-Himarra, the Allies now planned that the British should occupy a position behind the Vistritsa River, with their left at Grevena, and that the new Greek position should extend from Grevena to the seacoast. However, a successful withdrawal to the new line depended on holding the Germans at Monastir Gap. If this were not done, the Greeks would be cut off from the British and would be caught between two forces, the Italians in the west and the Germans in the east.

The force defending Monastir Gap consisted of three Greek mountain divisions greatly lacking in armament, mechanical transport, and modern equipment. Their artillery was mostly of the light mountain type, and they had practically no mobile guns of medium or heavy caliber. By this time the Greek Air Force was a negligible factor. The British had about 100 airplanes in Greece to oppose almost 1000 German planes. To assist in holding up the German advance long enough to permit the formation of the new line, General Wilson sent his armored brigade and a detachment of Australian motorized infantry toward Florina.

Southeast of Florina, near Vevi, a range of hills crosses Monastir Gap; here the British force took its stand. On 10 April, the advance guard of the SS division moved through Florina and struck the British position at Vevi. It was soon obvious to the German advance guard that the Australians could not be pushed out of the way without the help of the main body. The SS division made a frontal assault on the 12th. The fighting was bitter, often hand-to-hand, but by evening the Germans had succeeded in pushing their way through. A counterattack by British tanks was repulsed by German antitank
guns quickly brought to the scene. The British then began to withdraw toward Ptolemais. On the afternoon of the 13th the Germans sent a panzer division through the SS division to lead the drive. At Ptolemais it was attacked by the British armored brigade and a tank-versus-tank battle ensued. During the evening the British withdrew toward the Vistritsa River, executing an excellent job of demolition. Their mission had been accomplished; they had delayed the enveloping force long enough to permit the occupation of a line behind the Vistritsa River. On the morning of the 14th the Germans reached Kozani.

When General Stumme's troops reached the Vistritsa on the evening of the 14th, they succeeded in establishing a small bridgehead and planned to construct a bridge during the night and continue their advance toward Larissa the next day. However, British artillery fire prevented the construction of the bridge, and the German infantry was unable to advance and destroy the British batteries. Sometime during the 15th, General Stumme decided not to push the frontal assault across the river, but to make an envelopment instead. On the afternoon of the 15th a panzer division set out for Grevena and on the following day crossed the Vistritsa. From there on the advance became very difficult. There were no roads available, only trails that did not appear on the maps. Airplane photographs were used to locate the trails, and everyone was put to work clearing brush and strengthening bridges. After three nights and two days of toil, the panzer division broke through to Kalabaka on the morning of 19 April, but it was too late to cut off the British troops. Events on the right of the line had already forced the British to move south of Larissa.

After driving down to Salonika and forcing the surrender of Greek forces east of the Vardar River, as already noted, Bohme's corps turned to the west. On 13 April Veria and Ekaterini were occupied. These were two points on the original British position. By that time, however, the British withdrawal was well under way. From Ekaterini the Germans moved toward Larissa in two columns, one around each side of Mount Olympus. For five days the British put up a successful defense on the passes through which the Germans had to advance. On the 18th, they gave up their positions north of Larissa and withdrew through that city to the pass at Thermopylae, sixty miles to the south. This pass is formed by a deep arm of the Aegean Sea and the rugged mountains to the west. A small stream, the Spercheois River, flows from the mountains across the narrow coastal plain to marshy ground at the sea. The British held this position
from 20 to 23 April and then withdrew to a line across the peninsula at Thebes.

The exact date of the initial evacuation from Greece is unknown, but it must have begun before the British moved south of Larissa, since Volo was an embarkation port. The German Air Force bombed all ports of evacuation, and it was with considerable difficulty that the British were able to get away. Details are unknown, but it is doubtful that as high a percentage was evacuated from Greece as had been removed from Dunkirk. In Greece the British did not have control of the air. As early as 21 April they evacuated five Blenheim's and five Hurricanes, the last of their serviceable planes. Even before that the German Air Force had had practically no opposition.

On 26 April, German parachutists were dropped in the vicinity of Corinth, followed by air infantry which landed on a partially completed airfield. The bridge over the Corinth Canal was blown up by the defending detachment of British troops, and reports indicate that the casualties among the parachutists were rather heavy. The estimates on the number dropped in this area vary from 800 to several thousand. At 8:35 A.M., 27 April, advance parties of motorcyclists raised the German flag on the Acropolis in Athens. Some days prior to this, the king and most of the members of the Greek government had departed by plane for Crete, leaving only a military governor in command at Athens. On 30 April the Germans announced that all British troops had been evacuated or captured.

A few words on the Greek surrender will complete the story. It will be remembered that the Greek plan was to withdraw the right of their line in Albania to join up with the British behind the Vistritsa River at Grevena. This was accomplished by 16 April without too much interference from the Italians. However, the new Greek position extended only to Mount Grammos. It was because of the gap thus left between the Allies that the Germans, as already noted, encountered no serious opposition near Grevena when they crossed the Vistritsa there on 16 April.

After the German advance reached Kalabaka, a division was sent west to Janina. Caught between the Italians and Germans, the position of the Greek Army was now hopeless, and on 20 April the surrender took place. At that time the British were occupying the line at Thermopylae, and the Italians had not yet reached Greek territory. The surrender was made to the Germans.
COMMENTS

The military value of a study of the Balkan campaign is limited by the fact that the opposing forces were so unequally matched in combat power. If Great Britain had been able to concentrate sufficient troops and an adequate air force in Greece, the story would have been different. Furthermore, if the Greeks had had sufficient man power to hold in Albania and still concentrate along their northern border, the German advance south from Yugoslavia would have met with greater opposition. In Yugoslavia there was the same disparity in combat power. The Yugoslav Army, although numbering some thirty divisions, was ill-equipped and poorly organized. The ease with which the Germans advanced over the difficult mountain barrier between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia is indicative of the lack of readiness of the Yugoslavs.

Despite the inequality of the opposing forces, however, the German plan of operations for the conquest of Yugoslavia and Greece affords an excellent example of correct appreciation of terrain. The success of the operations depended entirely on rapid occupation of strategic mountain passes. The Germans recognized the importance of the Vardar Valley and the passes leading to it from Bulgaria. The occupation of Nish, Skoplje, and Veles divided the Yugoslavs from their allies to the south. The drives down the Vardar Valley and through Monastir Gap separated the British from the Greeks. Every move of the Germans was so nicely adjusted to the terrain that the mountain passes seemed to have been perfectly placed for German use. Despite the advantage which mountainous country and difficult defiles gives to the defender, the Germans turned them to their own use by rapid and coordinated action.

The Allies appear to have been completely surprised by the speed of the German march through Yugoslavia. No provision had been made by the Greeks for the defense of the Vardar Valley. At Monastir Gap some preparations for defense seem to have been made, but they were insufficient. The city of Skoplje was reached by the Germans on 8 April, and the SS division was at Florina on the 10th. In view of this rapid advance it is a small wonder that the Allies did not have time to prepare defenses at Florina.

As in all the preceding German campaigns, the coordination of the various arms of the service was excellent. Whenever the German armored forces were stopped in defiles by demolitions, by enemy fire, or by a combination of the two, either the armored or motorized infantry moved up and attacked on foot. This action usually forced an opening and permitted sufficient repairs to be made to roads or
bridges to allow the resumption of the advance by motor vehicles. The Air Force was an ever-present help. In addition to the bombing of communication centers and other targets in the rear areas, it also gave direct support to the ground units. As in the other campaigns of the war, superiority in the air proved to be a great advantage.

THE CONQUEST OF CRETE

INTRODUCTION (MAP 1)

The Germans did not feel that their victory in the Balkans was complete so long as Crete remained in the hands of the Allies. A study of the map will indicate the strategic importance of that island in the eastern Mediterranean. This importance, from the German viewpoint, was both offensive and defensive. For purposes of defense the possession of Crete was essential to the Germans in order to prevent its use as an air base by the British for bombing operations against the Rumanian oil field and other important German possessions in the Balkans. Furthermore, German occupation of the island would help to safeguard the Axis shipping route from the Aegean to the Adriatic Sea via the Corinth Canal.

From an offensive viewpoint, the acquisition of Crete would mean that the German Air Force would have a base from which it could operate to restrict the movements of the British fleet in the eastern Mediterranean, and from which it could conduct operations against North Africa and the Suez Canal. Crete is 280 miles from the Egyptian port of Mersa Matruh, 335 miles from Alexandria, and 450 miles from the Suez Canal.

Politically, the occupation of Crete would have a favorable effect on the German bloodless campaign against Turkey. With Crete in German hands, western Turkey would be almost surrounded by Axis possessions. This proximity of the Axis would also have an influence on other countries of the Middle East. Crete, therefore, was an extremely important objective and worthy of the campaign that was launched against it on 20 May.

The conquest of Crete is of particular interest to military men because of the unusual nature of the operation. This was the first occasion in history when an expeditionary force transported by air, and assisted by aerial combat units, conquered a distant island protected by an overwhelmingly superior navy and a land garrison that was considerably stronger, numerically, than the invading force. Such an operation would have been considered impossible prior to the invasions of Norway and Holland. In Norway the air units had
the support of sea-borne troops, and in Holland and Belgium they served merely as advance elements that were promptly supported by mechanized units. In Crete, however, the entire operation was from the air. Parachute and glider troops formed the advance guard and transport planes carried the infantry of the main body.

The Terrain (Map 2c).—The island of Crete is 160 miles long and varies in width from 7½ to 35 miles. Its south coast is generally precipitous and lacks good harbors. Sfakia is the only port on the south worthy of the name, and it is merely an anchorage, lacking wharves. Along the northern coastal plain are the three principal cities of Canea, Retimo, and Candia (Heraklion), as well as the harbor of Suda Bay. The fact that all important strategic objectives in Crete were located on this north coast, facing the German-held mainland of Greece, and the lack of a suitable harbor on the south to facilitate British communication with Egypt were major strategic handicaps for the Allied defending forces.

The island is extremely mountainous. There are high mountains in the central and eastern parts, and in the west the Maderas rise to an elevation of 8100 feet. The mountains are not wooded, but in general are covered by wild bushes and thickets. There are very few areas suitable for airfields.

The roads are very poor. The best highway runs along the northern shore, connecting the key points of Canea, Suda Bay, Retimo, and Candia. Roads across Crete from north to south are few in number, and those that exist are mere mountain tracks. This lack of north-south communication was a serious disadvantage to the British when they were forced to evacuate their troops to Egypt from the beaches of the south coast.

OPPOSING FORCES

The British forces on the island at the time of the German attack numbered approximately 23,000 men. This number included the garrison which had been occupying the island since the British took possession in November of 1940, as well as those British troops that had been evacuated from Greece. In addition to the British units, there were about 10,000 Greeks and some 4,000 native labor troops, making a total of 37,000. Of this total it has been estimated that only about 12,000 were efficient fighting troops; the remainder were odds and ends that had escaped from Greece without arms or equipment. The commander of the Allied forces in Crete was Major General Freyberg, a New Zealander who had served with the Anzacs in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign of 1915-16.
The Greco-British troops had about 60 per cent of their strength concentrated in the Maleme-Suda Bay area and the remaining 40 per cent equally divided between Retimo and Candia. In the Maleme sector there were 5,000 New Zealanders supported by three Greek battalions and some antiaircraft and artillery units. In the Suda Bay area there was a Royal Marine detachment of 3,000 men, as well as two Greek battalions, some coast artillery, and a few antiaircraft and field artillery batteries. The British had about twenty-five tanks on the island.

The British air forces in Crete were small. In the middle of May a total of only about fifteen serviceable planes of all types were stationed at local airfields. These were mainly pursuit planes of the Spitfire and Hurricane types, together with a few Bristol Blenheim bombers that had been withdrawn from Greece. The airfields in North Africa were too far away to permit effective support of the British forces in Crete, although a few bombers based on fields at Mersa Matruh actually participated each day from 21 May until the completion of the evacuation.

The British naval forces available for operations in the area included the greater part of the fleet based on Alexandria, which contained 3 or 4 battleships, 1 aircraft carrier, 4 antiaircraft cruisers, 27 destroyers, and approximately 15 submarines.

A German task force consisting of land, air, and sea units was created for the operation in Crete, just as in Norway. The commander of the combined force was General Löhr, an officer of the German Air Force. The land troops were commanded by General Student, an air officer who had distinguished himself as commander of the parachute and air infantry troops that had operated against Rotterdam in May 1940. General Student’s command comprised a parachute division, the 22d Air Infantry Division, and the 5th Mountain Division. However, only about 18,000 men from these divisions were actually used in the operations. This number was considerably less than their full strength.

The German air forces that participated in the operation are estimated to have had 360 bombers, 465 fighters, and 650 transport planes. These units were organized as the VIII Air Corps under the command of General von Richthofen. With the exception of sixty fighters based on the Italian island of Rhodes, the German air units were based on airfields in southern Greece. The only naval strength available to the Germans was the Italian Navy.
THE GERMAN PLAN

The German plan called for a prolonged bombardment of vital British installations in Crete during a period of four or five days before the landings should begin. These attacks were to be directed against the three airfields at Maleme, Retimo, and Candia and the improvised British naval base at Suda Bay. A newly built airfield at Kestelli in western Crete was another target of the German attack. By means of this preliminary bombardment the Germans hoped to paralyze the Royal Air Force or drive it back to Egypt, to neutralize the ground defenses of the British airfields, and to render Suda Bay useless as a British naval base. The actual landings of German troops from the air were to begin only after sufficient progress had been made by the Air Force toward the attainment of these objectives.

The initial mission of the parachute troops was to secure possession of the British airfields. The air infantry and mountain troops were to be landed only in case one or more airfields fell into German hands.

The parachute division was directed to land a regiment in the vicinity of each of the three British airfields at Maleme, Retimo, and Candia. Plans for further operations could not be prepared until the results of these attempted landings at widely separated points should become known. Strong airborne infantry reinforcements would be sent to any airfield seized by the parachute troops. Further plans could then be made.

A naval expedition of unknown size was also to play a part in the operation. The Germans dared not place too much hope in this expedition, for they realized that the British had great naval strength in this end of the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, they took the risk. The expedition was, in fact, destroyed, but this catastrophe did not prejudice German success on Crete as a whole.

OPERATIONS

Preparation.—The preparatory bombardment by the German Air Force of British installations in Crete was extremely heavy and effective. Many transport ships were sunk or damaged at Suda Bay, with the result that the improvised naval base there had to be at least partially evacuated. Still more serious for the British were the attacks on their airfields. The loss of British airplanes was so heavy that Air Marshal Longmore decided on 19 May to withdraw his remaining planes from Crete. This decision is said to have been
approved by General Freyberg, although Longmore was not under his command. The withdrawal of the little that was left of the air force did not substantially affect the military situation except that it brought about an unmistakable decline in the morale of the land forces. The British soldier had the feeling that his air force had deserted him. In such a frame of mind he was suddenly faced with an overwhelming airborne attack.

The Initial Landings.—As already stated, the German plan contemplated landings at Maleme, Retimo, and Candia. Beginning at dawn on 20 May the British defenses around Maleme airport were subjected to several hours of intensive preparatory fire by dive bombers using both bombs and machine guns. British officers who took part in the defense stated that this air attack was of “unparalleled intensity”, comparing in scope with the heaviest artillery preparations of World War I. Beginning at 8:00 A.M., about 2,000 paratroops were dropped over an area approximately eight miles long and three miles wide in the vicinity of the airport. Troops were also transported in gliders, which landed on beaches and other fairly level stretches of ground. Within a few hours after landing, and in spite of terrific losses, these initial landing parties were organized into an efficient fighting force. By noon undisputed control had been gained of a hospital and a penitentiary on the main road between Maleme and Canea, splitting off the Maleme airfield and its defenders from the British base at Canea. As evening approached, the attacking paratroops gained their objective, the Maleme airfield itself. This success permitted the transport planes to begin the movement of the air infantry detachments, and during the evening of the 20th, only a few hours after the field had come into German possession, these planes began using the runways. At this time the airport was still under British artillery fire, and it appears that many of the German transports were destroyed while on the ground.

The second phase of the German attack began at 4:15 P.M., 20 May, when parachute landings began in the vicinity of Retimo and Candia. A regiment of paratroops was dropped in each area. However, they did not have the success that was obtained at Maleme. The British defenders held the airfields and managed to destroy the greater part of the paratroops. However, these groups, though seriously weakened, maintained positions near the two fields and prevented the British from massing their full strength in the western sector to repel the German effort at Maleme. As a result of their failure to capture the airfields, the Germans at Retimo and Candia were entirely dependent on supplies of food and ammunition dropped
from the air. They were eventually relieved, on 27 May, by German mountain and motorcycle troops advancing east from Suda Bay.

The Land Attack.—In rapid succession, after the capture of the airfield, two regiments of the German 5th Mountain Division, air infantry regiments of the 22d Division, and a variety of auxiliary units arrived at Maleme by air from Greece. During the 21st and 22d, the greatly augmented force drove the British into their previously fortified position at Galatos, a village southwest of Canea. The next objective of the Germans was to clear the extreme western portion of the island of Greek and of British detachments, and thus permit all troops to be concentrated for a main drive from Maleme on Canea and Suda Bay. Motorcycle detachments which had been brought to the island in transport planes played an important part in these mopping-up expeditions. One motorcycle detachment pushed southwestward from Maleme to the town of Palaiokhora, at the southwest extremity of the island. Another advanced to the west, captured Kestelli, and took possession of the British auxiliary airfield south of the village.

After cleaning up the extreme western portion of the island, the Germans organized a coordinated drive on the British position at Galatos. German accounts stress the importance of the part played in these operations by regiments of the 5th Mountain Division under the command of General Ringel. These regiments penetrated the Galatos position on 25 May, and two days later captured Canea. The fall of the latter was brought about by a flanking movement through trackless mountains from Galatos to the area just south of Suda Bay. On the day Canea fell, 27 May, a small Italian force, transported by boats, landed at Sitia Bay in the eastern portion of the island. The size of the expedition is not known, but it is thought that its strength did not exceed that of an infantry regiment. This landing does not seem to have been opposed, and a slow advance in the direction of Candia was started by the Italians on 28 May.

The British withdrawal to villages on the south coast probably began on 27 May. The principal route of retreat appears to have been toward Sfakia. The main body of the German mountain division followed, and heavy fighting occurred on the 29th and 30th, which ended, according to German claims, with the capture of the British rear guards. The main body of the British, however, succeeded in embarking on the waiting destroyers and transports and eventually reached Egypt. One cruiser, two destroyers, and an unknown number of transports were sunk in the course of this evacuation.
The British in the Retimo and Candia areas were caught between the remnants of the paratroops that had landed there and the German troops sent by captured trucks from the Suda Bay area. These British troops were forced to surrender, except for a few that escaped and made their way to the southern coast.

**Naval Operations.**—Soon after the invasion began, the British eastern Mediterranean fleet, under Admiral Cunningham, entered Cretan waters to repel an expected German water-borne expedition. Such a force, convoyed by Italian naval units, was actually on its way to Crete. Its size and composition are not definitely known, but British reports state that during the night of 22-23 May one large transport and many small schooners were destroyed by their fleet and that thousands of German soldiers were drowned. The convoy was so largely destroyed that only a few survivors reached the island. These, of course, could not influence the outcome of the land battle. The Italians admitted the loss of one of the accompanying destroyers.

The German water-borne expedition, however, caused the British fleet to expose itself, without adequate air support, to an attack by von Richthofen’s VIII Air Corps, and a great battle ensued. A few planes from the aircraft carrier *Formidable* participated in the early stages of the fighting, but were forced to withdraw when the *Formidable* was damaged. The result of the battle was disastrous for the British Navy. While only two cruisers and four destroyers were sunk, fully three quarters of all British ships engaged suffered more or less severe damage. On 23 May Admiral Cunningham came to the conclusion that to remain in Cretan waters was to invite total destruction and consequently gave orders for the fleet to withdraw to its base at Alexandria. This decision left the British land forces on Crete isolated and insured the capture of the island by the Germans.

**COMMENTS**

Despite the fact that Marshal Göring has declared that the success of the German attack on Crete indicated that “no island is impregnable”, the Cretan operation cannot be regarded as an example of what would have happened in the event of an attack on the British Isles. The conditions under which the British sought to defend Crete were exceptionally unfavorable for the defenders and will probably never recur. The British had very little air power on the island, and the Royal Air Force in Egypt was too weak and too far away to permit its intervention on a large scale. Such a condition would not
have occurred in a battle over the British Isles, where a strong air force was ready to dispute air superiority on even or better terms.

Because of their novelty, and also their importance in the Cretan operation, it is of interest to note a few facts concerning the organization and use of the parachute and glider troops. An unusual feature of the parachute troops was their formation into a division. Heretofore, the largest unit identified had been a battalion, which served as the advance guard for an air infantry division. The parachute division used in Crete consisted of three regiments of 2,000 men each. The organization of the regiment was similar to that of regiments in a standard infantry division, there being three battalions of three rifle companies each. There was also a heavy weapons company in the battalion. The rifle company had 130 officers and men and the battalion, 550.

Each paratrooper is said to have carried an automatic pistol (tommy gun), four hand grenades, and a large knife. The heavier weapons were dropped in containers. These included light and heavy machine guns, antitank rifles, and 50-mm. and 81-mm. mortars. It appears that no weapon heavier than the 81-mm. mortar was dropped by parachute. Some containers were equipped with wheels and a tow rope to give a limited mobility. Personnel was carried in white and green parachutes, supplies in gray-green and brown. The average height of drop was about 300 feet, all parachutes being equipped with a quick-opening device. The men and equipment were dropped in waves of about 600 parachutes each, approximately two thirds of those in each wave carrying only equipment.

Glider transports, first used in the operations in Belgium, were again used in Crete. There were two types of German gliders, each weighing 1790 pounds. The frame of the fuselage was steel and that of the wings was wood. One machine gun was mounted on the right side to provide a measure of defensive strength and to help the morale of the troops. The towing speed of the gliders is thought to have been about 105 miles per hour, the maximum gliding speed, 70, and the landing speed, 35-40. There were no auxiliary engines.

Each glider carried twelve men with their equipment. Neither the men nor the pilot wore parachutes. They were towed by transport planes, generally in pairs but occasionally in tows of three. The gliders were cut loose from the transport planes about twelve miles from the island and at an altitude of from 6,000 to 7,000 feet.

It is believed that the Germans did not use a large number of gliders in the Cretan operation. British estimates of the number vary from fifty to one hundred. All evidence indicates that their use was purely experimental.
Because of the novelty of the parachute and glider troops and the spectacular nature of their operations, one must not be misled into thinking that they would have been decisive in themselves. It was the 22d Air Infantry and 5th Mountain Divisions, transported by plane with their complement of artillery, that bore the brunt of the attack. The speed with which these two divisions were landed assured success to the German effort. Had the British forces on the island been sufficiently mobile to permit their concentration at the Maleme airfield to stop the landings there, they would have forced the enemy to depend on water-borne troops. Furthermore, had the British destroyed the airfields when their air units withdrew on 19 May, they would have forced the Germans to come by water. The above does not mean that the German invasion of Crete would have failed. The success of their Air Force in its attack on the British fleet indicates that the air arm could probably have made it possible to transport by sea the number of troops needed, although the British Navy would undoubtedly have sunk many transports. In other words, the final outcome might have been the same.

The Germans admitted losses of 1352 killed, 2621 wounded, and 1921 missing. The British, on the other hand, estimated that the Germans lost 17,000 men, of whom 5,000 were drowned. The Germans have not released any figures on airplane losses, but the British claimed that they destroyed 180 bombers and fighters and 250 transport planes. The Germans claimed that the Allies lost 5,000 killed and 18,700 prisoners. These figures included the 10,000 Greeks on the island, none of whom escaped. The German figures on the Allied losses check rather closely with a British estimate.

One of the political repercussions of the Balkan campaign was a treaty between Turkey and Germany, signed at Ankara, 18 June 1941. Article 1 of this treaty, which was to have been in effect for ten years, stated: “The Republic of Turkey and the German Reich engage themselves mutually to respect the inviolability and integrity of their territories and abstain from all actions directed directly or indirectly against one of the contracting parties”. This neutralization of Turkey was one of the most important results of the campaign.
Greeks evacuated eastern portion of Metaxas Line prior to German attack.
THE BALKAN CAMPAIGN
1940-1941
THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA

SCALE OF MILES AFRICA

100 200 300 400

EGYPT
LIBYA (It)
SUDAN
ETHIOPIA
SYRIA (Fr)
SWITZERLAND
RUSSIA
CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS
IRAQ
SAUDI ARABIA
The Balkan Campaign, 1940-1941.

United States Military Academy, West Point, 1945.