

Cyrenaica, and had to leave many of their tanks behind.

38. While the withdrawal was in progress the news reaching General Wilson was of such gravity that he already began to consider the necessity for further withdrawal. It was reported that the Yugoslav army in the south had capitulated and it became obvious that the Greek armies in Albania were incapable of withdrawing to take their place in the line west of General Wilson's force and in fact that very little reliance could be placed on the fighting ability of the Greek army. The difficulties that General Papagos had foreseen in any attempt to withdraw from Albania and its effect on Greek morale had been justified and were increased by the collapse of the Yugoslavs.

General Wilson therefore decided to continue the withdrawal to the Thermopylae Line, which could be held at least temporarily by the Imperial forces alone. At a meeting between General Wilson and General Papagos on 14th April General Papagos approved this decision and made for the first time a suggestion that the British forces should evacuate Greece to avoid further fighting and devastation of that country.

39. Meanwhile, under circumstances of great difficulty, the Anzac Corps had taken up its new line and on it had had its first experience of the intense aerial bombardment by the German Air Force against its positions and its lines of communication. No great enemy pressure was developed against its positions, although on the morning of 15th April, determined small-scale attacks were made in both the Servia and the Katerini Passes. An attack on the positions of the 4th New Zealand Brigade in the Servia Pass was repulsed with the loss to the enemy of 180 prisoners and at least several hundred killed and wounded. Our losses were negligible. The Greek troops, which had been under General Wilson, had reverted to Greek command on the occupation of the new position.

40. General Wilson was anxious for the safety of his left flank during this new withdrawal, the more so as the Germans were known to have broken through the Greek troops at Kleisoura. Consequently, a force had to be found to block the roads leading southwards from the Grevena and Matsova areas into the Larissa Plain. Actually, no threat came from this flank and the main danger to the withdrawal arose from the speed with which the enemy followed it up from the north and from the heavy attack launched against a combined New Zealand and Australian force in the Peneios Gorge. This attack began late on 15th April and was pressed home by infantry and tanks, which proved to be the leading elements of one armoured and one mountain division. The 16th Australian Infantry Brigade which had been detailed to form a left flank guard on the Larissa-Kalabaka road was diverted, except for one battalion, to cover the western exit of the Peneios Gorge and to afford support to the 21st New Zealand Battalion, which was holding the gorge alone. The attack was made in such strength as to necessitate the transference of the weight of the defence from west to east. The defence of the gorge was carried out with such spirit that when at last on the evening of 18th April the Germans were masters of the gorge, the main body of the

Anzac Corps had successfully withdrawn past its western exit. The 21st New Zealand Battalion had been overrun and the whole of the 2nd/2nd Australian Battalion had been forced off their line of withdrawal into the hills after a stubborn fight against greatly superior forces. This action, together with other minor ones, and the use of skilful demolitions, prevented the enemy's armoured and mechanized units from following up closely. During the first two vital days of the withdrawal, enemy air action had fortunately been prevented by mist and low clouds, but from Larissa onwards columns on the road suffered air attack without respite. Otherwise, thanks to the rear-guard actions described above, the withdrawal was successfully carried out under the orders of General Blamey almost without interference,

41. By the morning of 20th April, the withdrawal to the Thermopylae line was practically complete. This naturally strong position was occupied by the New Zealand Division on the right from the sea to the summit of the mountains, covering the coast road; while the other Australian Division occupied the Brailos position covering the main road to Thebes and Athens. The 1st Armoured Brigade, which by this time had lost the greater part of its tanks from mechanical failure, was in reserve and protected the right and rear of the Anzac Corps against a threat from Euboea. The weakness of the position lay in the fact that the disintegration of the Greek forces made possible a German penetration on the extreme left of the line about Delphi.

42. Meanwhile in anticipation of the possible necessity of the evacuation of Greece, a committee of the Joint Planning Staff had been formed in the Middle East and was sent to Athens on 17th April under Rear-Admiral Baillie Grohman. The general situation in Greece now betokened the near end of Greek resistance. The Greek forces on the left of the Imperial troops had already disintegrated and it was obvious that little more could be expected from the Greek armies in Albania. The Piraeus had been so heavily bombed that it was practically unusable as a port, so that to send further reinforcements or supplies to Greece had become a matter of extreme difficulty. I cancelled the sailing of the Polish Brigade and the 7th Australian Division and went to Athens myself on 19th April. The Greek Prime Minister had committed suicide on 18th April. I saw General Wilson and General Blamey and had audience with His Majesty the King, who was now acting as head of his Government. It was decided, with the full approval of His Majesty the King and the Greek Government, that the evacuation of the British forces was essential. It was obviously impossible, in view of the overwhelming superiority of the German air force, to use the Piraeus or any other port for the re-embarkation of the force, which would have to take place from open beaches. I instructed General Wilson that the embarkation should take place on as wide a front as possible and that any troops who were cut off or were unable to embark on the beaches selected should not surrender but should make for the Peloponnesus, where there might be possibilities of evacuating them later.

43. General Wilson originally selected 28th April as the first night for embarkation, but the capitulation of the Greek army in the Epirus