

watercourses and the surrounding mountainous country. The escort of Hurricanes destroyed a Dornier. A large proportion of the German forces moving west against the Yugo-Slav armies had to pass through Strumitsa, as well as all the forces advancing on Salonika and those about to deploy themselves before our positions on the Mt. Olympus region. Consequently, as many heavy attacks as possible were made against targets in this area.

On the following day, the bad weather continued but in spite of it, we were able to get some of our reconnaissance machines through, and again in the evening we bombed enemy M.T. in considerable concentration near Strumitsa.

Since the army co-operation squadron was short of aircraft, and since it was considered expedient to avoid sending unescorted Blenheims on long reconnaissances, the fighter squadron was asked to help out with reconnaissance. This squadron was thereafter frequently asked to provide recce aircraft, and although the pilots had had no reconnaissance training, they carried out the most valuable work throughout this period of great stress.

The wing commander had received an appeal to give bombing support to the Greeks who were cut off in the Salonika area. On consulting the force commander as to the relative danger to the army of the various points which the German advance was threatening, the wing commander decided, in view of the limited opportunities for air operations offered by the weather, and in view of his limited air resources, not to dissipate any effort on a front which was already lost in spite of the gallant action still being fought in the Rupel area by the Greeks. Nevertheless, the powerful bombing attacks against Strumitsa were bound to have a direct effect upon the situation in the area of Kilkis and Salonika, since German columns passing through Strumitsa and south to Lake Doiran were attempting to encircle the Mt. Beles position.

On the following day, the weather was again very bad. From the information available, however, it was now clear that very considerable German forces were passing through Strumitsa, some advancing south by Lake Doiran were already in or around Salonika, whilst the greater part continued west and north west and were threatening the Monastir Gap.

The situation was beginning to unfold, contact was expected shortly on the Olympus line but anxiety was felt on account of the ineffectiveness of the Yugo-Slav resistance and the lack of information as to the situation in the north. Every effort was made by our air force to alleviate the pressure on the Yugo-Slav army in order to give them time to withdraw in front of the highly mobile German forces, and to take up strong positions in the mountains and gorges.

9th-15th April—1st Withdrawal.

40. Communications between Force H.Q. and Wing H.Q. to Athens were now becoming extremely poor, and I was virtually out of touch not only with the wing commander but with the G.O.C., with whom it was essential for me to be in constant communication. Accordingly, I sent an officer of air rank to take over operations in the forward area. The air officer took over at a time when, in view of the intention of the army to withdraw to the

Olympus line, plans were being drawn up to withdraw the ground party of the squadron of Blenheims at Niamata and to use it only as an advanced landing ground.

During the next few days, until the complete evacuation of the Larissa plain on the 15th, enemy M.T. columns and concentrations on the roads between Prilep and Bitolj and in the Amyntaion Area were bombed successfully by our aircraft. Our army had had little time to prepare strong positions in this area, which they had hoped would be protected for some time by the resistance of the Yugo-Slavs. A heavy burden was therefore thrown upon our air forces which now virtually had to make up for the time lost by the caving-in of the Yugo-Slav forces. No stone was left unturned to delay the enemy and to shield our ground forces. Meanwhile, our army was engaged in fighting a rear-guard action in the areas around Amyntaion and Kleisoura.

No sooner was the withdrawal to the Aliakmon line complete when, on account of the threat to its left flank, it became necessary for the army to make a further withdrawal to the Thermopylae line. Consequently, all R.A.F. units on the Larissa plain had to be withdrawn at once with the utmost speed along roads which were already congested. At the same time, the R.A.F. continued to throw all its power into delaying tactics.

On 14th April, the weather improved and German air activity intensified. The Germans had brought their fighters forward to the Prilep and Monastir areas, where their engineers had prepared the necessary landing strips. The German air force was mainly directed in close support of their army, and heavy dive bombing attacks were made against our troops. Our Hurricanes, escorting our bombers in attacking enemy M.T. on the roads near Ptolemais and disorganising his lines of communication, shot down many enemy aircraft.

41. On 15th April, the main effort of the German Air Force was directed against our air force, which had been delaying their military operations and had taken toll of their aircraft. Large numbers of short range fighters made their appearance over the Larissa plain and ground strafed Niamata. In spite of A.A., every aircraft of the Blenheim squadron located there was destroyed. Owing to the breakdown of the Greek observer system, our fighters were at a hopeless disadvantage. When, on one occasion, Me. 109s appeared over their aerodrome at Larissa without any warning, three Hurricanes were attacked whilst taking off and two were shot down. The third shot down one Me. 109. Although, when our fighters were able to get off, they played havoc with the enemy, the situation was obviously untenable. I was present on the Larissa aerodrome whilst this attack was in progress and I ordered the squadrons to withdraw to the Athens area forthwith.

The Albanian Front.

42. Meanwhile, the wide manoeuvre of the German forces advancing swiftly through the mountain passes north west and west of Skoplje was developing. Their intention was to force contact with the helpless Italian forces near Kukes in northern Albania and to threaten the right flank of the Greek armies in Albania from the Lake Ochrida area. The Greeks, who had