

fought so valiantly against the Italians throughout the winter months, were hardly in a position to withstand the extra pressure of the German forces. Withdrawal from Albania in the Koritsa area had been considered expedient by British commanders before the German invasion began. However, the Greeks did not take a sufficiently strategic view of warfare to allow such a withdrawal to be carried out without seriously affecting the morale of the army. This was especially the case when wrested from the despised Italian invaders. To give up their acquisition of their own free will and to see it fall once more into the hands of the Italians was for the Greek fighting soldier in the line an intolerable idea. When in fact, the withdrawal was eventually forced upon them, it was too late for the Greeks, reliant upon mule and bullock-cart transport, to conduct an orderly retreat. Morale and organisation collapsed. The Greek army commander at Yannina capitulated to the Germans.

As the situation in this area deteriorated, it became increasingly obvious that it was necessary to withdraw the R.A.F. Western Wing, consisting of one Blenheim and one Gladiator squadron. This was successfully carried out in spite of difficulties which arose as the result of numbers of Yugo-Slav aircraft and personnel arriving at Paramythia aerodrome and requiring fuel and food right up to the last moment.

#### *15th—24th April. 2nd Withdrawal.*

43. At this juncture, I decided to abolish the Eastern Wing and take over control of all operations from Athens. I left an R.A.F. officer at Force H.Q. to act as liaison between the army commander in the field and myself. Later, when Force handed over the direction of the withdrawal to Anzac Corps, this officer was attached there. The army commander desired only reconnaissance and fighter protection which we did all we could to provide.

Throughout the withdrawal, the army co-operation squadron carried out what reconnaissance they could. After they had evacuated Kazaklar, north of Larissa, they operated their few aircraft from Pharsala, which by this time was serviceable. Later they operated from Amphiklia, just behind the Thermopylae line. Here there was a Greek Gladiator squadron which was ground strafed and destroyed as soon as the Germans were able to locate their fighters on the aerodromes on the Larissa plain. The army co-operation squadron's Hurricanes were not on the aerodrome at the time of the ground strafing, and so luckily escaped, but I considered it wiser to bring them back to the Athens area.

In view of the complete numerical superiority enjoyed by the enemy, I decided to operate my Blenheim squadrons by night as much as possible in efforts to delay, as far as lay in our power, the enemy's advance. But after the decision to evacuate had been taken, the whole weight of the German Air Force was turned on the Athens area and there was no alternative but to save what air crews and material remained. These squadrons ferried the remainder of the personnel of their squadrons to Crete and carried out their instructions with discipline and courage in the face of great peril.

#### *Direction of Bombing Effort.*

44. As far as the direction of bombing is concerned, the operations against the Germans followed four clearly defined phases:

The first phase, lasting for about two days, was the disclosure of the enemy plan prior to gaining contact with our troops. During this phase, bombing was directed at previously arranged targets in the Struma valley, including Petrich, Simitli, Gorna Djumaya and Sofia.

During the second phase, in which the direction of the German advance was recognised and in which every possible effort was made to alleviate pressure thrown against the Yugo-Slav armies in the west and the Greek armies in the Salonika area, bombing was directed against supply columns and concentrations of enemy M.T. at the bottleneck around Strumitsa, where the German forces divided into two columns.

The third phase, in which a serious threat developed against the British armies in the region of the Monastir gap, was devoted to the bombing of bottlenecks, railway junctions, stations, bridges, defiles and concentrations of enemy M.T. on roads leading towards the Monastir Gap, from Skoplje, Veles, Prilep to Bitolj.

The fourth phase was the direction of all our air effort in hindering and delaying the advancing Germans to allow our army to conduct a successful withdrawal. All our resources were thrown into the task of alleviating the pressure on our forces in order to allow them the maximum amount of time to withdraw and to prepare new positions.

Targets were chosen at points where it was calculated that the effect of dislocation would be most widespread amongst advancing German columns, and yet close enough to the rear of the German fighting troops to have the maximum immediate effect upon the progress of their advance.

It is impossible to calculate the degree of success which this policy attained, but German prisoners who fell into our hands told woeful tales of the heavy bombing which they had suffered from the R.A.F. throughout their advance. On the night 14/15th, our Wellingtons created much chaos at Veles and broke the bridge across the Vardar. A glance at the map will at once show the importance of a dislocation in the German L. of C. at this point. It is the hinge upon which one, perhaps the greatest, of the main German drives depended.

The continual bombing of M.T. which presented some of the best targets which our Blenheim pilots, accustomed to such targets as dispersed vehicles in the desert, had ever known, caused much confusion amongst the enemy.

#### *Withdrawal of Fighter Squadrons.*

45. The fighters were withdrawn to the Athens area, since no aerodrome north of this was free from ground strafing. The constant lack of intermediary aerodromes made it inevitable that, if our fighters were placed on an aerodrome from which they could give protection to our troops, they were in imminent danger of destruction by ground strafing as soon as they were on the ground. If, on the other hand, they were placed beyond the range of ground strafing, they were unable to protect our troops and the tightly packed columns of M.T. withdrawing along the roads. The utmost efforts were made to give the maximum protection to our continually harassed troops. All our machines were working to maximum capacity. Many of our pilots were working at extreme range, challenging untold odds and at times, after they