

enemy columns on the road from Ptolomais to Kozani. Our aircraft continued to attack similar objectives during the night of 15th-16th April and throughout the following day, to impede the enemy's advance on Katerini and Kozani.

43. Meanwhile the Army had stubbornly held the Mount Olympus-Aliakmon Line until 14th April when it was turned by the Germans forcing the Kleisoura Pass. Our forces started to fall back on the Thermopylae Position on 15th April, completing the withdrawal by the 20th April. This new situation necessitated the withdrawal of all R.A.F. Squadrons to the Athens Area on 16th April and from that date onwards they were controlled directly by H.Q., B.A.F., Greece. Eastern and Western Wings were consequently disbanded.

Continuous enemy attacks on our aerodromes, coupled with losses from enemy fighter action, had by this time considerably reduced the effective striking power of our Squadrons. In a series of attacks on one day alone, the enemy destroyed 10 Blenheims on the ground at Niamata and damaged several other aircraft which had to be subsequently destroyed and abandoned. Several such attacks were made, during which many aircraft were destroyed or rendered unserviceable, but owing to the loss in several instances of unit records during the ultimate evacuation, full details of enemy raids are not available. Towards the end the repeated enemy attacks on our aerodromes in the Athens Area caused further heavy losses, and as a final blow a force of Hurricanes retained at Argos to cover the evacuation was almost wiped out when 13 of them were destroyed on the ground during intensive enemy air attacks on 23rd April.

In turn our aircraft attacked the German occupied aerodromes on the Salonika and Larissa Plains in an endeavour to reduce the scale of the enemy's air effort. Thus between 15th and 22nd April Blenheims made effective night attacks on the aerodromes at Sedes, Katerina, Kozani and Larissa, starting several large fires. The effort could not, however, be maintained on a sufficiently heavy scale to cause any material reduction of the enemy's air effort, bearing in mind the comparatively large numbers of aircraft and reserves available to him.

Nevertheless, our Squadrons continued to operate until, in the end, the use of aerodromes was virtually denied to them by constant enemy air attacks. In the concluding stages Blenheims attacked enemy columns advancing on the Larissa Plain, concentrating on road bridges between Kozani, Grevena and Kalabaka to impede the enemy's progress. One particularly successful attack was made when Blenheims bombed a large M.T. convoy concentrated in front of a broken bridge across the Aliakmon River a few miles from Kalabaka. Similarly our fighters continued to engage formidable enemy formations with success. Throughout the campaign they had gained many victories against the numerically superior enemy, but at no time was their skill and high morale more in evidence than in the concluding stages. In a number of combats during the period of intensive enemy air activity on 19th and 20th April, Hurricanes of Nos. 33 and 80 Squadrons destroyed a total of 29 German aircraft and probably destroyed another 15. In addition,

Fighter Blenheims of No. 30 Squadron probably destroyed 2 Italian bombers. These successes were achieved with a loss of 7 Hurricanes brought down and 2 damaged, a truly remarkable record in view of the increasing disparity of strength between the R.A.F. and the German Air Force.

44. At the beginning of these operations the combined strength of the German and Italian Air Forces amounted to approximately 1,100 aircraft, of which over 40 per cent. were fighters, a little less than 40 per cent. bombers and dive-bombers, and the remainder reconnaissance aircraft. The total strength of the R.A.F. in Greece with reserves was approximately 200 aircraft, of which about half were bombers. Although outnumbered, our Squadrons operated with success in the initial stages of the German advance. It is probable that unfavourable weather and the lack of forward all-weather aerodromes at that stage prevented the enemy from making the best use of his superior numbers. As the enemy advanced, however, he was able to establish forward aerodromes, at first in the Salonika Area and subsequently on the Larissa Plain, from which he was able to exploit his numerical superiority to the fullest advantage. He was thus able to concentrate an overwhelming force which took an increasing toll of our aircraft both on the ground and in the air. These casualties could not be replaced at that time from the slender reserves available in the Middle East, particularly in view of the dangerous situation which had arisen in the Western Desert. The odds which our Squadrons had to face, therefore, increased disproportionately until the Germans had gained virtual air superiority. With that achieved they were able to concentrate the main weight of their attack against our troops, lines of communication, and ports. By 20th April our much-depleted Squadrons were concentrated at the few remaining aerodromes in the Athens Area, where, as already described, they were exposed to continuous air attack. With the complete collapse of the Greek resistance it became evident that even the shortened Thermopylae front could not be held against the superior weight of the enemy and the decision was made to withdraw all British Forces to the coast and embark them for Crete or Egypt.

45. The scheme for the evacuation of R.A.F. personnel aimed at the removal of air crews and certain key personnel by air in Squadron and transport aircraft and flying boats. The remainder were to be evacuated by sea with other British and Imperial Forces. Wellingtons of Nos. 37 and 38 Squadrons had already flown to Egypt on the 17th and 18th April, the personnel and equipment following by sea on 23rd April. In addition, 14 Blenheim Fighters of No. 30 Squadron flew to Crete on 18th April to provide convoy protection during the projected sea evacuation. The remaining aircraft of Nos. 11, 84, 113 and 211 (B) Squadrons and 208 (A.C.) Squadron, amounting to 24 Blenheims and 4 Lysanders, flew to Egypt on 22nd and 23rd April, the Blenheims having previously made several journeys between Greece and Crete evacuating air crews.

The enemy air attack on Argos on 23rd April, already referred to, had reduced the remaining strength of Nos. 33 and 80 Squadron