A Greek Tragedy? The Royal Air Force's Campaign in the Balkans, November 1940 to April 1941

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The campaign in Greece in the winter of 1940-41 was the last of three disastrous expeditionary campaigns mounted by British forces in the first fifteen months of the Second World War, following the intervention in Norway and the *blitzkrieg* in France and Flanders. While the campaigns were similar in nature – all were joint, fought in coalition and culminated in a desperate evacuation - each had a unique character, and this paper will suggest that the RAF's experience in Greece yields specific and valuable contemporary lessons about the employment of air power. Most importantly, success and failure were intimately connected to the degree of control of the air that could be achieved, in turn determined and constrained by the organisation of deployed logistics and support functions. However, the campaign is most notable as an example of the primacy of the political imperative above purely military considerations, and illustrates the unpalatable strategic choices that Commanders must subsequently make as they attempt to manage and mitigate the operational consequences.

Hitler always faces me with a fait accompli. This time I will pay him back in his own coin. He will find out from the papers that I have occupied Greece.

Benito Mussolini[1]

Introduction

Greece represents the right-hand panel of the triptych of expeditionary campaigns that the Royal Air Force fought in the first fifteen months of the Second World War, following the disastrous operations in Norway, France and Flanders. All three campaigns were joint; combined, in that they were fought with allies or partners; involved an interplay of strategic and operational priorities that presented Commanders with agonising (and often impossible) choices about the allocation of patently inadequate resources; and finally, all ultimately culminated in failure and a desperate evacuation. However, while the campaigns were similar in nature, each had its own very distinct character, and this paper suggests that the particular circumstances of the RAF's operations in Greece yield many valuable lessons of much contemporary relevance: not least the difficulties of working within *ad hoc* and unplanned coalitions with non-traditional or unfamiliar partners; the absolute necessity for adequate deployed logistics support, infrastructure and force protection to enable effective expeditionary air operations; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, that political necessity will trump purely military considerations, so the real challenge for Commanders and planners is to accept this reality and mitigate and manage the consequences as best they can.

The First Phase: The Italian Attack and the Greek Response, November-December 1941

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Greece wisely sought to maintain its neutrality. However, this became increasingly difficult because of the bellicose stance adopted by Mussolini's Italy. *Il Duce* chafed at his subordinate position within the axis and wished to establish his independence from Hitler by matching the German military successes in Poland and France. Consequently, he decided to attack Greece, which he regarded as the easiest opponent within Italy's perceived sphere of influence, without consulting his German ally. Mussolini issued a deliberately unacceptable ultimatum to Athens on 28 October 1940, but had already ordered his forces to invade; the first Italian troops had already crossed the border from southern Albania into north-west Greece before the Greek Government could formally reject the Italian dictator's demands. Britain was obliged to assist Greece under the terms of a formal guarantee of sovereignty made in April 1939, which declared that 'His Majesty's Government would lend all the support in its power in the event of any threat to Greek independence'.[2] However, the reality of the geopolitical context in late 1940 was very different to the situation that had been envisaged when the treaty was signed before the war. The disastrous outcome of the first year of fighting meant there was no British strategic reserve in the Mediterranean, so any military assistance would have to be drawn from the Middle East, an area of much greater strategic priority than the Balkans where all available British and

Commonwealth forces were already heavily committed. Consequently, nothing could be done immediately to help Greece.

Fortunately, the initial Italian thrust made little progress. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Greeks counter-attacked and had pushed their opponents back into Albania within three weeks. The Greek General Staff was, therefore, relatively sanguine about the lack of British military support on the ground. However, it was a different matter in the air. The Italian air force, the *Regia Aeronautica*, enjoyed a considerable quantitative and qualitative superiority over the tiny Greek air component, and was able to deploy at least 300 relatively modern aircraft into the theatre of operations, backed by adequate reserves readily available in Italy. In contrast, the Greeks entered the war with a polyglot collection of just 150 aircraft, of which only about 70 had any sort of combat capability. Most of the aircraft were French or Polish and, as these nations had been overrun by Germany, there were few spare parts available, particularly as there was no Greek aviation industry to act as an alternative source of supply. Additionally, the Greek air element was directly controlled by the General Staff, which regarded it solely as an adjunct to the army. Consequently, the few serviceable combat aircraft that were available were quickly expended in close air support missions that achieved little overall effect.[3] Consequently, the *Regia Aeronautica* soon established total control of the air, capitalising on this luxury by bombing targets at its leisure, both in direct support of Italian operations on the battlefield and through a series of raids on Athens that were designed to sap Greek morale and undermine the civilian population's will to resist.

These virtually unopposed attacks increasingly alarmed the Greek Government, and intense pressure was brought to bear on the British Minister in Athens to provide air support. Air Chief Marshal Longmore, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East, responded by sending No. 30 Squadron (a *Blenheim* squadron whose aircraft were a mixture of bombers and makeshift fighters equipped with a four-gun ventral pod) to defend the Greek capital. He cabled the Chief of the Air Staff that 'It seems that it has become politically absolutely essential to send a token force to Greece even at the expense of my forces here'.[4] Churchill commented that Longmore had 'taken a very bold and wise decision.' Inspired by Greece's stubborn resistance to aggression, the British premier decreed that additional air support should be provided, so two more Squadrons of *Blenheims* and two squadrons of *Gladiator* single-seat biplane fighters were stripped out of the Middle East and sent to Greece. The chiefs of staff realised this would dangerously weaken the defence of Egypt, but accepted 'this risk would have to be taken in view of the political commitment to aid Greece'. This initial deployment reduced fighter strength in the Middle East by a third, bomber strength by a half and completely removed the air defence of the key base at Alexandria.

Air power's speed of response is one of its most important and enduring characteristics and by the time the designated air component commander, Air Vice-Marshal J.H. D'Albiac, arrived in Athens on 6 November, advance elements of No. 30 Squadron were already in place and ready for action.[5] D'Albiac's main problem was the scarcity of adequate airfields; bases around

The Air Component Commander, Air Vice Marshal John D'Albiac

Athens had reasonable operating surfaces, but almost no accommodation or other infrastructure and were 300 miles away from the frontline, too distant to be of any use for the short-range *Gladiators*. However, the few available landing grounds located further forward were even more austere and also prone to autumnal flooding. The result was that 'while the enemy could make the most of his great numerical superiority by operating from hard runways only a few miles behind the front, our tiny force was thus handicapped by every consideration of weather, site and maintenance'.[6] From mid-November until the end of December, only 235 bomber sorties were flown, or about one sortie per week per aircraft. Long-range *Wellington* bombers operating from Egypt were also sometimes available on an opportunity basis, but only if not tasked elsewhere, at night and during moonlit periods. The Greeks were disappointed by the scale of effort and agreed to build two all-weather airfields as a matter of urgency, but little could be done to increase sortie generation until this work was completed. Tension was also apparent within the chain of command, as Longmore was less than enthusiastic about having to maintain a significant force in Greece when he felt it could be better employed in Egypt, and the political-military relationship became strained when he learned that the British Minister in Athens had appealed to London for more air reinforcements without his knowledge.[7]

There were also important conceptual differences about the most effective employment of air power. D'Albiac was continually pressed by his hosts to concentrate on close air support in accordance with Greek doctrine, even though the tiny Greek air element had wasted away to almost nothing after being used in this manner. Instead, D'Albiac argued that his limited bombing capability could be employed far more effectively in an interdiction campaign against Valona and Durazzo, the main Italian ports of disembarkation in Albania, and the communications hubs in theatre. This was eventually accepted by the Greeks, not least because D'Albiac had gained their trust by establishing a close and cordial working relationship after collocating his headquarters with the General Staff in Athens. A nightly conference was held every evening to discuss the day's air operations and to allocate tasks for the next day, often attended by both the Greek King and the premier, General Metaxas. D'Albiac thus gained influential and intimate access to the highest level of national command.[8]

The success of D'Albiac's interdiction campaign is difficult to measure with certainty. Valona was attacked seventeen times before the end of the year and the *Wellingtons* operating from Egypt also damaged the main embarkation ports on both sides of the Adriatic. Empirical evidence suggests that the bombing was effective, as captured Italian soldiers admitted that the supply situation was so bad that they received food only once every three or four days, although it is not entirely clear whether this was due to the RAF, inadequate Italian logistics or, most likely, a combination of the two.[9] In contrast, the results achieved by the handful of

fighters were much more tangible. The mere presence of the converted *Blenheims* of No. 30 Squadron immediately deterred air attacks on Athens, while the single-engine fighters deployed further forward denied the *Regia Aeronautica* the freedom it had previously enjoyed to operate over the battlefield with impunity, with No. 80 Squadron, for example, claiming 42 enemy aircraft for the loss of only six of its own *Gladiators* by the end of 1940.

The Second Phase: Stalemate, January-March 1941

By December, it was becoming clear that Hitler was planning an intervention of his own to clear up the Balkans on behalf of his increasingly humiliated Italian ally. The *Wehrmacht* ear-marked twenty-seven divisions for the operation, code-named *Marita*, with the stated aims of securing the southern flank of Germany's forthcoming offensive on the Soviet Union and removing any potential threat to the vital Romanian oil-fields from British bombers based in the Balkans. The selected course of action was to occupy both Greece and Yugoslavia, where a *coup d'etat* had recently overthrown the pro-axis regime. Although the Greeks had previously been reluctant to accept British offers of token land forces for fear of provoking a German attack, the scale of these preparations encouraged the Greek high command to begin urgent negotiations about the deployment of a substantial British Expeditionary Force (BEF). After much soul-searching, General Wavell (the overall British Commander in the Middle East) decided that up to four British divisions could be made available (in fact, much of the force would consist of Australian and New Zealand troops), even though this put the security of Egypt and the rest of the Middle East at grave risk. Nevertheless, the first Commonwealth troops began to arrive in Greece on 7 March. In the meantime, Longmore, with equal reluctance, provided another five Squadrons to match the increased commitment of land forces, including a few more capable *Hurricane* eight-gun monoplane fighters to supplement the obsolescent *Gladiators*. The reinforcing squadrons were No. 11 and No. 113 (*Blenheims*), No. 112 (*Gladiators* and *Hurricanes*), No. 33 (*Hurricanes*) and No. 208 (*Lysander* army co-operation aircraft and *Hurricanes*).

D'Albiac now had to find even more bases in a country that was 'desperately short not only of airfields, but of general communications'.[10] Grass airfields were still too soft or waterlogged for regular use, while the strips with harder surfaces were in 'wildly inconvenient' mountainous locations. It took two to three days for fuel and weapons to be transported to these airfields by road and providing functioning communications was a problem that was never satisfactorily resolved; an *ad hoc* early warning system was developed, using Greek observer posts connected directly by telephone to the nearest fighter base, but this usually

Flight Lieutenant Joe Fraser of No. 112 Squadron poses with his Gladiator at the forward operating base at Yanni in April 1941. Fraser was credited with ten victories during the Greek campaign.[11] This photograph gives some indication of the rugged terrain and difficult weather experienced at austere forward bases.[12]

monopolized the only landline available so that other priority calls could often take over six hours to get through.

Air operations throughout January and February were hampered by poor weather. This allowed the *Regia Aeronautica* to reinforce its fighter strength both numerically, and with more modern types than the *Fiat CR42 Falco* biplanes previously employed. Although the RAF's ability to maintain sufficient control of the air was threatened, D'Albiac finally agreed to switch his main effort to close air support to assist the Greeks in an all-out offensive aimed at taking the key port of Valona before a German intervention was possible. Once again, the psychological affect of bombing proved to be out of proportion to the physical damage inflicted, with the Italian garrison being shaken and visibly demoralized following a series of air attacks. In parallel, the arrival of the extra fighters – especially the *Hurricanes* - helped to restore parity in the air. The *Hurricanes* claimed four Italian aircraft on their very first sortie in theatre and on 28 February (in company with a *Gladiator* squadron) shot down 27 enemy aircraft without loss.[13] The dogfight took place over the Greek lines, providing a marked fillip to morale and enabling each success to be confirmed from the ground.

Despite these setbacks, Italian air strength continued to increase, forcing D'Albiac to revert to an offensive counter-air campaign against the Italian Air Force's airfields and supply depots to avoid losing control of the air completely. The Greeks reluctantly accepted the change in emphasis, but the army-dominated General Staff never really understood the rationale behind it. D'Albiac's senior Staff Officer, Wing Commander Coote, reported that 'in vain we tried to explain the proper employment of an air force and the disparity between our strength and that of the enemy', but lamented 'at the end we gained our point, but the same discussion started again on the morrow'.[14] The air component's need to secure sufficient control of the air as a necessary prelude to all other operations has been one of the most enduring sources of tension throughout the history of air-land integration; it has always been very difficult for soldiers to understand that air power is making an effective contribution to the joint campaign unless they can actually see it delivering tangible effects in direct support of the land component.[15]

The Final Phase: The German Assault, 6-25 April 1941

By March, the Greek offensive in Albania had stalled as a result of more bad weather and continuing Italian reinforcement of the front. A renewed Italian offensive made little headway and an uneasy stalemate developed as the *Wehrmacht* began its final preparations for Operation *Marita*. The German air effort would be the responsibility of *Luftflotte 4*, a self-contained, multi-role tactical air force fielding 1,200 aircraft of all types, supported by the 300 Italian aircraft still available for operations over Greece. In comparison, the Allies were heavily overmatched: D'Albiac's ten squadrons ostensibly comprised some 200 aircraft, but the logistical difficulties meant that only 82 were serviceable, while only a handful of Greek aircraft were left in action. The RAF component was split into three wings: a Western Wing supported the Greeks in Albania; an Eastern Wing covered the Anglo-Greek force facing the expected main axis of the German attack; and two squadrons were held in reserve around Athens.

The German assault began on 6 April. Following the pattern established in the campaigns of 1940, the *Luftwaffe's* first priority was to gain and maintain control of the air. This was initially hampered by poor weather and did not always go entirely to plan subsequently; for example, on one occasion, 12 RAF *Hurricanes* attacked a force of 20 *Messerschmitt Bf 109* fighters and claimed five without loss. However, the German offensive counter-air effort was remorseless and the few functioning allied airfields were obvious targets. On 15 April, a series of strafing attacks by *Messerschmitt 109s* at Larissa destroyed every single *Blenheim* of No. 113 Squadron. When D'Albiac visited the airfield later in the day, he arrived just as more *109s* bounced a flight of three *Hurricanes* as they took off, shooting down two of the British fighters before they could even retract their wheels. The third *Hurricane* managed to get airborne and shot down one of the German fighters overhead the airfield, but D'Albiac realised that the Eastern Wing's position was no longer tenable and he ordered its immediate withdrawal.

D'Albiac was now caught on the horns of an almost impossible dilemma. After just over a week of fighting, he only had 46 aircraft left in action, and these would almost certainly be destroyed if they remained at vulnerable forward bases. However, if they were withdrawn to the rear they would still provide a tempting target, as they would be concentrated at a few landing grounds around Athens that were devoid of anti-aircraft gun cover; in any case, they would also be too distant from the frontline for the short-range *Hurricanes* and *Gladiators* to protect either the *Blenheim* bombers or the allied troops. This problem was resolved as the heavily outnumbered Anglo-Greek army progressively disintegrated in the face of the German land offensive. On 17 April, the Greek king warned D'Albiac that a general collapse was imminent, so all of the surviving fighters were withdrawn to Athens and the remnants of the bomber squadrons evacuated to Crete. In the Western Wing, No. 208 Squadron had a lucky escape as it executed the order; the *Hurricane* squadron had just taken off *en route* to Athens when a German attack swept in at full *geschwader* strength, destroying the last few Greek *Gladiators* left on the airfield and effectively wiping the last of the Greek air component off the order of battle.

Now concentrated around Athens, the few remaining RAF fighters were scrambled repeatedly over the next few days to meet incoming *Luftwaffe* raids of fifty-plus aircraft. The climax came on 20 April in what became known as the 'Battle of Athens', when a force of almost one hundred German aircraft attempted to obliterate the RAF's main operating base at Piraeus. By now, only fifteen *Hurricanes* were flyable, but in a swirling dogfight they claimed 14 enemy aircraft (Greek observers counted 22 German aircraft shot down) for the loss of five of their own number, unfortunately including the inspirational leader of No. 33 Squadron, Squadron Leader 'Pat' Pattle. A South African by birth, Pattle is variously credited with between 40 and 50 victories flying *Gladiators* and *Hurricanes*, making him possibly the highest scoring British and Commonwealth ace of the Second World War.[16]

Squadron Leader Marmaduke St.Thomas 'Pat' Pattle, possibly the Second World War's leading British and Commonwealth air ace, lost his life in 'The Battle of Athens' on 20 April.

Another of the *Hurricane* pilots was Roald Dahl, later the famous author. In his autobiography *Going Solo* he vividly captures the chaos and confusion of the battle: 'Wherever I looked I saw an endless blur of enemy fighters whizzing towards me from every side. They came from above and they came from behind and they made frontal attacks from dead ahead. It was truly the most breathless and in a way the most exhilarating time I have ever had in my life'.[17] In an interesting commentary on training and preparation during these desperate days, it is illuminating to note that Dahl had had just seven hours experience on the *Hurricane* (including the transit to Greece) when he arrived in theatre as a replacement pilot and had never flown in formation or fired the guns; nevertheless, he still managed to shoot down a *Junkers Ju 88* bomber on his first combat sortie. In his post-action despatch, D'Albiac summarised the nature of the fighting:

> *Even after having been shot down, our fighter pilots would immediately take to the air in aircraft which had been riddled with bullets and were by normal standards totally unserviceable. The courage of these men never failed nor looked like failing. Each day they stepped into their battered aircraft not without a sensation of fear, but quite undismayed.*[18]

Dahl provides a somewhat different perspective: 'My hand was shaking so much I couldn't put the flame to the end of the cigarette. The doctor came up and lit it for me. I felt embarrassed, but when I looked at the other pilots, their hands were shaking as much as mine were. But I was feeling pretty good. I had stayed up there for thirty minutes and they hadn't got me'.[19]

Evacuation

Since 17 April, the British had been considering a complete evacuation from Greece in the light of the collapsing front. On 22 April, the Greek Army at Epirus laid down its arms after being outflanked and, with the *Liebstandarte SS* motorized division established at Yannina, there was a real danger that the Germans would take Athens from the west before the BEF could escape to the beaches. Immediate evacuation was the only possible option and the operation was planned for 25 April. By this stage, the only RAF aircraft left in Greece were 18 *Hurricanes*, comprising the remnants of Nos. 33, 80 and 208 Squadrons. These flew to Argos from Athens on 22 April to cover the evacuation, but the anti-aircraft detachment intended to protect them was sent to the wrong airfield. Consequently, thirteen of the fighters were destroyed on the ground in an intense series of *Luftwaffe* attacks mounted throughout 23 April. In response, Air Commodore Grigson, commanding the rear party, decided he had no choice but to withdraw the seven surviving aircraft to Crete. They departed at first light on 24 April, just eighteen hours before the first British troops were due to embark.

This meant that the only air cover for the evacuation was provided by 15 *Blenheims* flying from Crete in the long-range fighter role. D'Albiac – somewhat optimistically – considered that 'it was due largely to their efforts that such a large proportion of British Forces were evacuated'.[20] However, despite their shortcomings as extemporised fighters, it is likely that the *Blenheims* did have some effect. The evacuation fleet operated under the cover of darkness and left the Greek

coast early enough to ensure that they were out of range of the lethal, ship-killing *Ju 87 Stuka* dive-bombers by the time dawn broke. This meant they were also out of range of *Messerschmitt 109* fighters, so the *Blenheims* only had to contend with unescorted medium bombers over the fleet, although these could still often outpace the underpowered British aircraft. Nevertheless, the *Blenheims* were able to disrupt and distract at least some of the German bomber raids, and overall shipping losses were acceptable in an operation of this sort. Sadly, at least one *Blenheim* was mistakenly shot down by a British destroyer, although fratricide was almost inevitable at a stage in the campaign where any aircraft seen could more reasonably be expected to be German rather than British.[21]

Air mobility also made a significant, if somewhat melancholy, contribution to the success of the evacuation. *Sunderland* flying boats ferried over 900 soldiers and airmen from the Greek mainland to Crete and Egypt, including most of the Allied senior Commanders and the Greek King. One aircraft managed to lift 84 personnel, an extraordinary achievement given the *Sunderland's* toted maximum capacity of 30 passengers.

Air mobility and lift: Short Sunderland flying boats assisting with the evacuation.[22]

Two civilian 'C-Class' flying boats of the British Overseas Air Corporation were also co-opted to assist with the airlift effort, bringing out another 469 troops in thirteen return trips. The method of loading was 'to allow the troops to file in until the forward door was so low that water began to pour in, then the door was slammed and the flying-boat took off as quickly as possible before it sank'.[23]

The Reckoning

The first phase of the RAF's campaign in Greece was profitable, with nearly 200 Italian aircraft destroyed at the cost of 47 British aircraft. The air component also contributed to the success of Greek land operations through the interdiction of Italian supply lines and by providing direct close air support on a limited number of critical occasions. The final phase was a different matter, with the RAF losing another 151 aircraft during the German assault (including 87 unserviceable aircraft abandoned and destroyed in the various withdrawals and evacuations), although the Luftwaffe also admitted to losing 164 of its own aircraft, albeit mainly in operational accidents.[24] However, and more significantly, the air component's influence on the overall outcome of the campaign was negligible.

Analysis

Unsurprisingly and predictably, the RAF's successes and failures in Greece were determined by the degree of control of the air that was achieved. In the first and second phases, the air component was heavily outnumbered by the Italian air force, so nothing approaching any sort of a conception of 'air superiority' was possible, especially after the Italians reinforced their

air element in terms of numbers and improved equipment. However, a judicious offensive air campaign, coupled with concentration in time and space of the few available fighters, meant that the RAF achieved sufficient control of the air (on a temporary basis) to prevent the *Regia Aeronautica* from influencing the campaign decisively, while permitting other RAF air operations (such as interdiction and close air support) to be conducted without undue interference. This tends to support current British air doctrine, which measures control of the air against a sliding scale of freedom and denial rather than in degrees of superiority or supremacy. *AP3000: British Air and Space Doctrine*, for example, talks of 'the freedom, bound by time, to use a volume of airspace for one's own purposes while, if necessary, denying its use to an opponent'. In the case of the Greek campaign, additional doctrinal clarification that 'the required degree of control is achieved when a commander assesses that a planned surface or air operation will not be compromised by enemy action and that the risk to his own forces posed by enemy air is acceptable'[25] is plainly also pertinent.

Unhappily, none of the conditions for even temporary control of the air could be met after the Germans intervened in the third phase of the campaign. Even more heavily outnumbered than before, and now also qualitatively outclassed by the *Luftwaffe*, the RAF had to concentrate almost exclusively on battling for its own survival; this severely constrained its ability to make any sort of effective contribution to the joint campaign as a whole. After 17 April, when control of the air was completely lost and the last surviving *Blenheims* were withdrawn to Crete, this became an absolute reality: the only missions subsequently flown by the RAF in Greece were by its few remaining fighters in defence of their own airfields, sorties that were therefore irrelevant to the wider campaign. In these circumstances, the only real contribution that could be claimed was in diverting some of *Luftwaffe 4's* resources and sorties into the contest for control of the air and away from supporting the *Wehrmacht's* operations on the ground.

Underlining the doctrinal primacy of control of the air is not, however, the only important lesson of the campaign. At the simplest level, control of the air was lost because the RAF did not have sufficient fighters of good enough quality to contest it. But even had more, and better, aircraft been available, the paucity of suitable airfields, the lack of deployable command and control facilities and adequate, mobile, logistics support meant that it would have been very difficult to employ them effectively; as it was, well over 50% of the aircraft lost in theatre were abandoned because they could not be repaired or maintained adequately. In contrast, as the German offensive rolled south, the *Luftwaffe* brought sufficient deployed operating bases into service to meet its needs and was then able to successfully support and re-supply them from the air.

This was not just a question of materiel, but also a reflection of the differing philosophies between the two air forces: the *Luftwaffe* was organised into self-contained tactical air forces that were optimised for mobile, expeditionary warfare, including, for example, an organic allocation of transport aircraft, anti-aircraft guns and even mobile meteorological and catering services. In contrast, the RAF had complied with the interwar policy direction that there

would be no commitment of British forces overseas by organising itself into mono-functional commands (Fighter, Bomber, Coastal) intended to fight single-role campaigns from a static base infrastructure in Great Britain. There was little capability, equipment or training for deployed operations and the expeditionary air components used in the first two years of the war in Norway, France and Greece were therefore extemporised organisations, lacking a well-established structure for deployed command or support functions.[26] The ancillary support for the RAF in Greece, for example, was drawn from an *ad hoc* collection of seconded army units not under command. The RAF did not establish a genuine expeditionary capability – able to deploy tactical air power in the field effectively – until the creation of Tedder's Western Desert Air Force and, later, 2 Allied Tactical Air Force for the North-West Europe Campaign. The problem of adapting a structure configured for a particular expectation of the sort of war that will be fought is enduring; twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the RAF is still seeking to develop an organisational framework that adequately reflects the transition from a static, main operating base construct to a genuinely expeditionary posture. The current Expeditionary Air Wing concept, and the more recent separation of the responsibilities of Groups, Force Commanders and Station Commanders, are the latest manifestations of the attempt to square the circle between the demands of peace-time training and force generation on the one hand and deployed operational practice on the other.[27]

Conclusion: Military Means versus Strategic Ends?

The Middle East Commanders-in-Chief who 'got' the big picture but were forced into impossible choices: Admiral 'ABC' Cunningham, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore and General Sir Archibald Wavell.

Ultimately, Britain's campaign in Greece was a political gamble that failed. It was criticised by members of Parliament in 1942 as 'a romantic and sentimental decision' while the acknowledged 'master of strategy', Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke (Chief of the Imperial General Staff and Churchill's principal military advisor), described it baldly as 'a strategic blunder.'[28] In purely military terms, it is difficult to dispute this judgement. Wavell, as overall Commander in the Middle East, simply had more commitments than resources and Greece was the straw that broke the camel's back. Military strategy is about bringing ends, ways and means into balance,[29] but this was impossible in the Middle East in the winter of 1940-41 given the number and extent of desired political objectives set against the scarcity of the forces available; even before the German invasion of Greece had begun, the British had already lost much of Cyrenaica, Malta was under heavy attack as a prelude to a possible airborne assault, there was burgeoning unrest in Iraq and a long and bloody battle was being fought at Keren in Italian East Africa. Consequently, the official history disputes the contemporaneous view of the Middle East Commanders-in-Chief that 'it was one damned thing after another' by dryly commenting that rather 'it was everything

in all directions at once'.[30] Without the diversion of forces to Greece, it is entirely possible that the war in the desert could have been shortened by as much as two years, because the British may well have been able to successfully conclude the North African campaign before Germany had the opportunity to reinforce the beaten Italian army in Libya with Rommel's *Afrika Korps*.

Despite the compelling military case for non-intervention in Greece, the political imperative meant this was never a realistic option. As the last major democratic power surviving in Europe, it was unthinkable that Great Britain could - or would - shrink from its obligations to its Greek ally. At the very grandest of grand strategic levels, this was all a question of messaging. Churchill recognised that Britain's only chance of ultimate victory was to engage the still neutral United States of America ever more closely in support of the allied cause. He calculated that this was far more likely to be achieved by being seen to help another 'freedom-loving nation' (especially the cradle of democracy, albeit currently ruled by a military *junta*) with all of the power at his disposal, even if the cause was hopeless, than by not attempting to help at all. The Middle East Commanders may not have liked this unpalatable strategic choice, but they understood it - even if it meant perpetuating the traditional British approach of 'despatching inadequate forces to assert moral or strategic principles',[31] an observation that some commentators have also applied to the United Kingdom's most recent military interventions in Basra and Helmand.[32] This begs the question as to whether a Commander should ever endorse a course of action that does not make sense in strictly military terms; and on occasions, the answer is clearly that he or she will have to do so, although the advice offered to decision-makers must always be honest and the risks involved acknowledged and, if possible, mitigated.

Within four weeks of the end of the campaign in Greece, Admiral Cunningham was confronted with exactly this sort of choice after the successful German airborne assault on Crete. Cunningham was given the option to abandon the Army and break off the evacuation because of the unsustainable losses that were being inflicted on his ships by the *Luftwaffe*; but he assessed that the potential long-term damage to the Navy's reputation outweighed the short-term benefit of preserving what was left of the Mediterranean fleet, ordering operations to continue with the famous comment that 'It takes three years to build a ship; it takes three centuries to build a tradition'.[33] The ability to exert influence depends on reputation and prestige as much as on numbers and capability, a combination that would be currently understood within the vogue descriptions of *soft* and *hard* power. Cunningham recognised this intuitively and factored it into his decision-making; in contrast, arguably this is not as instinctive in current British military practice; for example, Frank Ledwidge argues persuasively that the decision to withdraw from Basra in 2007 may have made pragmatic military sense in the short-term, but took little account of the longer-term damage to Britain's martial reputation and, therefore, its international standing and ability to exert international influence, particularly with its most important ally.[34]

In the winter of 1940-41, all three Mediterranean Commanders-in-Chief regretted the need to divert any of their scarce resources to Greece, but they acknowledged the strategic imperative

and the political necessity; collectively, they 'took the big view and accepted the short-term consequences', acknowledging that: 'The war, in fact, was more important than the battle'.[35] Given this unpromising strategic context, it is difficult to envisage that the Air Commanders (principally Longmore, the Commander-in-Chief Middle East, and D'Albiac, the air component commander) could have played the almost impossible hand they were dealt in a much better way than they did.

Finally, the Greek campaign may have had one truly critical if serendipitous strategic benefit, although this could not have been foreseen at the time and is still the subject of academic debate. The German offensive in the Balkans set back Operation *Barborossa*, the invasion of the Soviet Union, by at least four weeks; arguably, the time lost in Greece and Yugoslavia may have been the vital factor in the *Wehrmacht's* failure at the gates of Moscow with the onset of the Russian winter in late 1941, securing the Soviet Union's survival and paving the way for Hitler's ultimate defeat in Berlin four years later.

Notes

[1] Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries 1939-43*, (London: Doubleday, 1946), p.247.
[2] Sheila Lawlor, *Churchill and the Politics of War*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), p.167.
[3] I.S.O Playfair et al, *The Mediterranean and Middle East Volume 1: The Early Successes Against Italy*, (London: HMSO, 1954), p.227.
[4] Playfair, p.228.
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[12] *Ibid*.
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