Politics and Military Advice: Lessons from the Campaign in Greece 1941

By Squadron Leader David Stubbs

This paper suggests that the British decision to become involved in Greece, with a token RAF force in November 1940, helped set in train a series of events which ultimately led to the disastrous joint and coalition venture, where the military desire to satisfy the political appetite for grand strategy caused some commanders to ignore their own assessments that intervention was likely to fail without adequate air support. The paper will show how political pressure was applied to the military commanders and how their objections were gradually eroded so that they began to ignore their own rational analysis and come to believe that the impossible was possible, with ruinous consequences in terms of men and equipment.

Introduction

Flt Lt 'Joe' Fraser 112 Sqn Gladiator pilot, Greece 1941

In June 1940, shortly after the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk and France, the Bartholomew Committee, comprised of five army officers of one star rank and above, reported on lessons from the campaign. The Committee's narrowly focused report reflected its single-Service composition and its evidence base: one RAF officer but over forty army officers. It concluded that given a reasonable fighting chance the British Army could fight the German Army with confidence of success in the future because 'man for man the Briton was better than the German'.[1] The report's analysis epitomised the British Army's misunderstanding of German all arms warfare by mistakenly assuming that in the battle of France the German Army had controlled and directed the German Air Force (GAF) air assets as 'organic' elements. This misnomer caused the Committee to decide that one of the major factors in the defeat in France was the RAF's failure to mirror the German practice of playing the supporting rather than an independent role. Though the vast majority of soldiers would never read the Committee's findings their collective experiences in France led many to intuitively agree with its analysis and conclusions.[2] Despite the RAF's heroics in the Battle of Britain most soldiers were not persuaded about the importance of controlling the air or denying the enemy air superiority. They questioned whether, without home advantage, the RAF could compete with the GAF and they worried that the RAF might be unable to give them the protection they felt necessary to fight what they still considered the most important battle: the land battle.

After the debacle in Norway in the winter of 1940/1941 the next opportunity on Europe's mainland to test the Bartholomew Committee's thesis occurred in the early months of 1941 when German forces threatened Greece by moving into neighbouring Romania and Bulgaria. Earlier in October 1940, when the Italians invaded Greece, the Greeks chose to fight the Italians without the support of the British Army because of their fear that extensive British support might provoke the Germans into attacking them. They did, however, ask for air support. So, when a few squadrons of mostly obsolete RAF aircraft were sent to Greece in November 1940 the British guarantee to Greece, made in 1939, was honoured. Nonetheless, when the Germans advanced into Bulgaria in 1941 the British became aware of their intentions with regard to Greece and became intent on sending land forces to Greece in the hope that with the aid of regional coalition allies Yugoslavia and Turkey they could trigger grand strategic activity to threaten the Germans from the south. They believed this might cause Germany to collapse due to their perceptions of German economic weakness.[3]

The German economy collapsed towards the end of the First World War and available industrial intelligence in the lead up to the Second World War led the British, Churchill and Eden in

particular, to conclude that getting a British foothold in Greece would create similar pressures to seriously weaken the German war effort. Such thinking, however, had underestimated the strength of German reserves in war materials and the impact upon their access to the resource base created by their victories in the West though the Germans were heavily reliant on the raw materials produced in Yugoslavia for their industrial and military needs and Hitler had worried that the RAF Force in Greece would threaten German access to Romanian oil. His diplomats therefore threatened to attack Greeks if they allowed the British to attack the Ploesti oil fields, from Salonika.[4] The Greeks wanted to conclude the Greco-Italian war to their satisfaction in a way that enabled Greece to avoid any involvement in the wider World conflict. Therefore, they continued to engage in secret negotiations with the Germans while also sheltering under the umbrella of the British guarantee to Greece made in 1939. Consequently, the Greeks constrained RAF activities to the Italian front, ideally for them, in a close air support role.

The paper will describe why the RAF was sent to Greece as a token force in 1940 and will assess the impact its involvement had on the subsequent assessments of the potential for land forces to succeed against German forces attacking Greece through Bulgaria. It will show how the political desire to create a Balkan front against the Germans caused some of the leading military decision makers to provide irrational advice to the politicians at crucial moments when assessments for the prospects of the Greek campaign were being made. In this regard it will suggest that the Air Officer Commander-in-Chief, Sir Arthur Longmore was influenced to minimise his serious doubts about the prospects for the air campaign. In his memoirs Churchill claimed that intervention caused the delay of the German attack on the Soviet Union,[5] but van Creveld has shown that the swiftness of the German victory in Greece caused only minor disruption to Barbarossa and that the main reason Barbarossa was delayed was because of the general shortage and slow distribution of transport to the eastern front.[6] Joel Hayward has pointed out that even when the Germans secured access to Romanian oil they would continue to struggle to meet their oil demands in the ensuing campaign[7] but apart from the excellent '*Diary of A Disaster*' by Robin Higham, comparatively little has been done to uncover why British land forces were fielded against the proven German all arms capability without sufficient, state of the art RAF involvement.

By focusing on the land warfare considerations and the apparent failure of the Greeks to retreat to the agreed positions on the Aliakmon line most historians have concluded that the British Army's position became untenable, that the RAF in Greece was too small to counter the German air threat during the retreat and that the rapidity of the German advance stymied any other options for a defensive line elsewhere in Greece.[8] Some recent scholarly articles have challenged this interpretation of events. Peter Ewer has claimed that British planners thought Greek topography would prevent the Wehrmacht from repeating their air supported Blitzkrieg success seen in Western Europe[9] and Craig Stockings and Eleanor Hancock have postulated that the GAF advantage in the air has often been overstated because the psychological effects of frequent air attacks led soldiers to incorrectly conclude that air attacks had been decisive despite their ineffectiveness in killing soldiers, damaging roads and destroying equipment.[10]

Essentially, the argument they have put forward is that the planners thought that air power would only have a marginal impact upon the campaign and that the subsequent events proved them right.

However, there is evidence that, despite the relatively small amount of physical damage inflicted by the GAF during the campaign, the psychological impact of GAF hegemony was so significant that it greatly affected British soldiers' will to fight: that air power did have a significant impact upon the outcome of the British campaign in Greece. Furthermore, a careful examination of the factors behind the politicians' geo-political assessments that led up to the decision to commit the British Army to Greece highlights a number of issues that we need to consider. Firstly, it will examine the role played by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill and Sir Anthony Eden, which gives context to the advice given by the senior Army and RAF commanders involved. Secondly, any increase in the British commitment to Greece must have recognized that the RAF's involvement in Greece, which preceded any British army involvement by six months, had been conceived as a token gesture to fight against the Greeks' considerably weaker Italian adversaries. Thirdly, in planning the Greek campaign the lessons from the defeat in France and the victory in the Battle of Britain were set aside or grossly misinterpreted when deciding whether British Army intervention was a viable proposition. Fourthly, a properly researched, articulated and distributed 'estimate' of the RAF's regional capability would have identified that the RAF could not hope to successfully oppose the likely German onslaught in Greece in 1941 and that without air support the British and Greek armies were destined to lose the ensuing campaign.

In this regard we need to consider carefully the part played by the RAF's senior commander in the region, Sir Arthur Longmore, focusing on the advice he gave after it became apparent from ULTRA derived intelligence that German intervention in Greece was inevitable. It will argue that Longmore recognised that the aircraft he had available for the campaign could not hope to deny the Germans control of the air but that after his repeated complaints about his lack of resources fell on deaf ears, due to misunderstandings about the number of aircraft his Command had received, he felt compelled, at Tatoi in February 1941, to acquiesce to political and joint pressures by setting aside his doubts and remaining silent. By doing so he helped to justify and compound the advice that misled political leaders to conclude that the proposed campaign in Greece against the Germans was viable when the evidence shows it never was.

Politics, Strategy and Churchill's Perception of Wavell's Military Leadership

Churchill's relationships with his military commanders were often fraught.[11] Some he disliked from the outset; one of these was the thoughtful and considered General Sir Archibald Wavell, his Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in the Middle East. Churchill thought him ponderous and lacking in dynamism. In July 1940 Churchill entrusted his friend, General Bernard Freyberg, to appraise the dead-alive way Wavell's Middle East campaign was being run.[12] After reading Freyberg's report Churchill summoned Wavell to England in early August 1940 for 'severe discussions'. The report had led Churchill to believe that 'a great reverse' could be inflicted on

the Italians threatening Egypt and that Wavell was misusing the vast resources at his disposal. Churchill was so taken by the report that he even considered removing Wavell and replacing him with Freyberg. Such thinking may help explain why Wavell was directed to give Freyberg the command of British forces in Crete in May 1941, with disastrous results. On his return to Cairo Wavell received precise orders from Churchill, leaving him in no doubt that "Winston did not trust me to run my own show and was set on his own ideas."[13] This sequence of events marks the beginning of the process by which steadily increasing political pressure was applied to Wavell to make him adhere to the military aspirations of his political leaders. It is in this context that the events described in this paper should be viewed.

Churchill was not at first the driving force behind British intervention in Greece and was not initially inclined to support the Greek cause. At the War Cabinet meeting on 27 October 1940 Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for India and Lord Lloyd, the Colonial Secretary suggested the Greeks be supported with military aid, only for Churchill to rebuke them for ignoring the resource implications for such a venture. Events, it seems, changed his mind; the next day, when the Italians invaded Greece, Churchill, who was prone to running grand strategic ideas past the War Cabinet, thought that a geo-political Allied alliance could threaten the German right flank on their eastern front, in the Balkans. Despite his earlier worries about resources Churchill, on 4 November 1940, deliberately manoeuvred the War Cabinet into an early acceptance of a British military commitment to Greece in order to mitigate the effect of any later worries they may have had over the range and breadth of concurrent operations required. Churchill was fully aware, through a strictly personal cipher message from Eden, the Secretary of State for War, from Cairo of Wavell's imminent plan for an offensive against the Italians in North Africa but he chose to hide this knowledge from the Cabinet.[14] Consequently, the Chiefs of Staff duly directed Wavell 'to give Greece the greatest possible material and moral support at the earliest possible moment' and to 'put this plan in train at once.'

The result of Churchill's scurrilous behaviour was that separate appreciations of the likely consequences of British Army involvement in a Greek campaign were carried out in London and Cairo and they came to very different conclusions about the likely outcomes. In early November 1940, however, the Greeks were reluctant to accept the British Army on their territory because of their fear of provoking the Germans. They thought they could compartmentalise their war with the Italians and avoid involvement in any wider conflict with the British against the Germans. Therefore, they wanted RAF support against the Italians because the Greek Air Force was very small.[15] Given the range of his commitments in Africa Wavell is likely to have been grateful that any demands for British support would fall on the RAF and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, Air Officer Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) Middle East, not on the British Army.

The Royal Air Force in Greece 1940 – A Token Force

Longmore's aircraft starved command lacked the resources necessary to provide the scale of support the Greeks wanted. He needed all the aircraft - he had at his disposal for the planned

campaign against the Italians in North Africa and could spare very few, if any, for Greece. He explained his difficulties to Eden, who five days after the Italians invaded Greece advised London:

> 'To send such forces from here or to direct reinforcements now on their way or approved would imperil our whole position in the Middle East and jeopardise plans for offensive operations now being laid in more than one theatre.'[16]

Yet, only twenty-four hours later Longmore signalled Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, the Chief of Air Staff (CAS), to acknowledge that the political imperative would require "some measure of assistance" to Greece. He was arranging for Wellington bombers to attack Adriatic ports and refuel at Greek aerodromes and, if necessary, would dispatch a Blenheim I Squadron to Greece.[17] While waiting to take over as CAS Portal had thought about sending more fighter aircraft to the Middle East in a hand-written note, dated 16 October 1940, to the deputy chief Air Vice-Marshal Sholto-Douglas:

> "You mentioned this evening that we now had lots of fighters in store and were just becoming well off for pilots. Are you satisfied that we have done all we should for AOC-in-C ME (I don't mean necessarily that he should use them to help Greece)?"

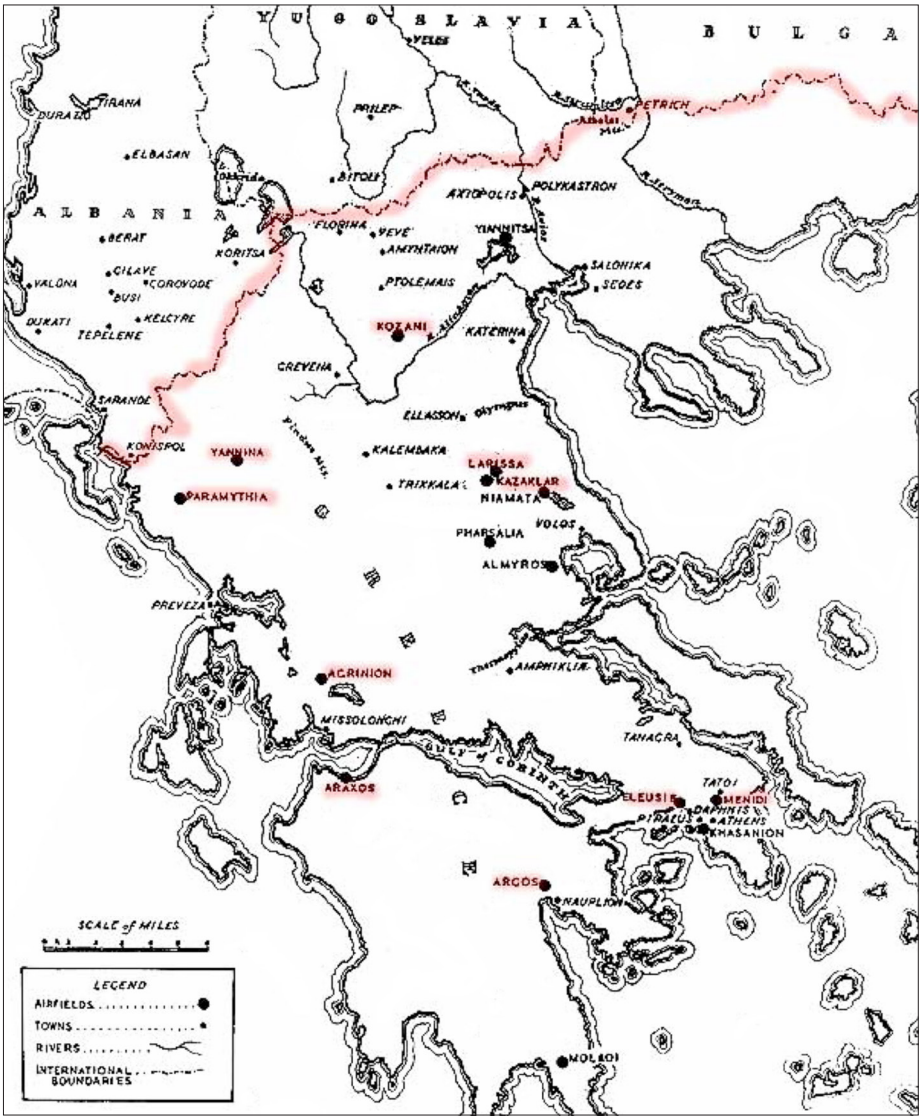
At the time fears of another German attempt to invade Britain were pre-eminent and the priority was to maintain strong fighter forces at home, at the expense of the Middle East or anywhere else. Longmore was thinking practically and politically but may not have appreciated how his honest assessments were perceived and what impact they would have on Portal in the War Cabinet. He was even concerned that he might struggle to support the one Blenheim squadron he was directed to provision for Greece if their war with the Italians lasted more than ten days.[18]

A 211 Sqn Blenheim I operating in Greece 1940-1941

On 6 November 1940, Longmore moved Air Commodore John D'Albiac from Palestine to Athens to take command of RAF forces in Greece in what became known as Operation Barbarity. Nine days later D'Albiac, promoted to Air Vice-Marshal, was Air Officer Commanding British Air Forces in Greece. Any idea that the RAF's token force would be supplemented by British Army involvement was scotched when Major General M.D. Gambier-Parry, the head of

the army section of No 27 Military Mission in Athens, was rebuked by the Chiefs of Staff on 9 November 1940 for considering the idea openly:

> "You are entirely wrong in supposing that wind is blowing in direction of possible despatch of British military forces to Greek mainland, and you are expressly forbidden by any work or suggestion of yours to imply such a course is contemplated. To arouse false hopes would be disastrous."[19]



RAF Airfields in Greece 1940/41

Between 14 and 23 November 1940 two squadrons of Blenheim medium bombers, one mixed squadron of Blenheim medium bombers/two-seat fighters and one squadron of single-seat Gladiator fighters also arrived in Greece. In the first week of December another Gladiator squadron followed. In managing his forces D'Albiac endeavoured to abide by the direction given to him by Longmore's deputy, Air Vice-Marshal Peter Drummond, the Senior Air Staff Officer in the Middle East, who directed D'Albiac:

> "not to allow the bombers to be used as artillery or to participate in the actual land operations unless the military situation becomes so critical as to justify the temporary diversion of our bombers from strategic bombing to support the Greek land forces. Appropriate objectives for the Wellington bombers are points of disembarkation and concentration areas on the Albanian coast...."[20]

Drummond's direction tallied with RAF doctrine regarding operations in support of the army, which sought to avoid RAF involvement in costly close air support (CAS) missions.[21] Given the paucity of available aircraft and the fact that the RAF's opponent was the Italian Air Force the decision to send obsolete aircraft was rational, but this decision must have been made on the understanding that if the GAF became involved the RAF contingent would be seriously outmatched by the first class fighter aircraft at its disposal. Clearly, Longmore believed that RAF support to Greece was politically driven and in his biography he acknowledged that he might have to defer to the Air Ministry in setting the operational objectives for the aircraft under D'Albiac's command. Only when it was clarified that his remit as Commander-in-Chief extended to incorporate Greece did he begin to exert operational command of his forces there, and only then did he direct that attacks should be focused on Italian communications with Albania, not close air support.[22]

Wavell and Longmore wished to focus on preserving and concentrating their forces for Wavell's Libyan offensive[23] and initially they misread the intensity of the political desire to provide viable and effective support to the Greeks. The RAF's token involvement was clearly evident and its sortie rates were, according to the Greek King, a fifth of those flown by the very small Greek air force. D'Albiac resisted Greek approaches to provide close air support to the front line troops despite a persistent press campaign led by Reuters to do so.[24] It was October 1941 before D'Albiac acknowledged the impact close air support missions had on troops, and only then when crafting his complaints about ill discipline amongst British and Dominion forces during their withdrawal and evacuation when under such form of attack.[25] Others were more perceptive about the motives for sending obsolete aircraft to help the Greeks: on 14 November 1940, Air Commodore Lionel Payne, remarked "It is really mere eye-wash therefore turning over Bleheims to Greece expecting them to get away with it."[26] On 6 January 1941, Churchill acknowledged the extremely modest support the RAF was giving to Greece.[27]

Yet Wavell's astonishing success against the Italians in Libya emboldened the Greeks to consider resisting the Germans. General Ionnis Metaxas, the Greek Prime Minister, naively hoped the

RAF Crews with a Greek Intelligence Officer - Paramythia

British could knock Italy out of the war and secure the Albanian front, without threatening German interests. To that end he denied the British the bases they desired in Salonika, which threatened German, not Italian, interests. When Metaxas died unexpectedly in January 1941 his successor Mr Koryzis continued to follow this strategy agreeing that British soldiers could only be sent to Macedonia if the Germans established themselves in Bulgaria.[28] But when, on 10 January 1941, Longmore was made aware of German intentions in Bulgaria and Romania he was convinced that the moves were a bluff to induce more support to Greece and denude RAF forces in Libya.[29] Clearly, Wavell and Longmore saw Greece as a 'side-show' to the main Libyan operational theatre and wished to limit the support provided to Greece as much as possible due to their lack of available resources. D'Albiac did what he could with what he had while being subjected to repeated requests for more air support from the Greeks who, given their intent to deny the British airbases near Salonika, were lethargic in providing the RAF with the airfields necessary to expand its involvement.[30]

Grand Strategy

The death of Metaxas afforded another opportunity to persuade the Greeks that a coalition of similarly minded states, comprising Yugoslavia and Turkey, could effectively combine with Greece and Great Britain in an alliance against the Axis powers in the Balkans. The initiative to involve the British Army in Greece coincided rather neatly with Wavell's successful campaigns against Italian forces in Libya and Italian East Africa and with the intelligence that indicated the German intentions in Greece. In effect, there were two races running concurrently between the British and the Germans: one to influence the regional states to support their interests and one to position their forces in sufficient strength to enable the defence or defeat of Greece. Churchill's desire for British Army intervention in Greece may also in part have been influenced by the involvement of Colonel William 'Wild Bill' Donovan, President Roosevelt's emissary to the theatre. Though America was still neutral the British gave Donovan VIP treatment. He lodged with the British Ambassador, Sir Michael Palairet, in Cairo and, between January and February 1941, Donovan was escorted around the theatre by British Army Colonel Vivian Dykes. Roosevelt may have hoped that a Balkan Front against the Germans might weaken their hegemony over Europe. Consequently, Donovan shuttled between the region's capitals to show that the Americans supported the idea of a regional coalition against the Germans,[31] albeit to little avail.

So, in the context of the events described above, the Defence Committee's decision on 5 February 1941 to commit the largest possible force to Greece appeared reasonable[32] though

it was thought necessary to persuade the Greeks that it would be in their best interests as they were not read into ULTRA intelligence and their nervousness of provoking the Germans continued to influence their thinking. However, at that stage Wavell did not believe a campaign in Greece was militarily viable. On 27 January he had pointed out to Churchill the importance of logistics in modern war, that Army operations anywhere were entirely dependent on effective air support and that air reinforcement must continue to keep pace with any reinforcement of troops. He even suggested an alternative air-focused strategy by arguing that a more effective deterrent to any German advance in the Balkans would be knowledge that any infringement of Bulgarian neutrality would at once bring heavy air attack on Romanian oilfields.[33] After meeting with Wavell, Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, advised the War Cabinet that the idea of employing ground forces in Greece was untenable as "all the troops in the Middle East are fully employed and none available for Greece."[34] This reinforced Churchill's concerns about Wavell's aggressiveness and judgement, and he allegedly responded to Dill by saying 'What you need out there is a Court Martial!'

Churchill's reaction is likely to have made a strong impression on Portal who was in his third month as the RAF's Chief of the Air Staff. Henceforth he was careful to appear overtly cooperative, so that any objections he raised were understood to be significant and valuable. Portal, as a member of the Chiefs of Staff (COS), concluded that the defence of Turkey was more important than the defence of Greece; his rationale being that the ability of the RAF to bomb Romanian oil from Turkey might deter Germany from absorbing Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. Portal asked Longmore to be ready to send 10-15 squadrons to Turkey.[35] Understandably, given his previous concerns about his lack of resources, Longmore was aghast at the suggestion: he found it hard to understand why he should send so large a force to a neutral country when he could spare so few for the Greeks.

Wavell, Longmore and Eden in Cairo

Nevertheless, Churchill gave Eden (now the Foreign Secretary) plenipotentiary powers, in diplomatic and military matters, and dispatched him with Dill on a series of missions between Cairo, Athens, Belgrade and Ankara in an attempt to negotiate and organise a coalition of Balkan States to secure an alliance against the German right flank.[36] Their attempts at grand strategy ended in fiasco because they misjudged the ability of the Yugoslav military and misunderstood the implications of the German reliance on access to Yugoslavian natural resources. The Turks and Yugoslavs were fully aware of German regional strength and sought to avoid any commitment with Britain that might turn the German war machine on them. Longmore must have been relieved that his resources would therefore not be stretched by commitments made to Turkey. Churchill's behaviour in these events was again determined

and threatening, and his overtly expressed concerns about Wavell's military ability and judgement set the tone for later exchanges between Churchill, Eden, Dill and Wavell. Wavell may even have become worried that Churchill was thinking of replacing him with Freyberg and how such a change in command would play out in the various campaigns he was managing. This might have influenced his later behaviour.

In London, the political appetite for intervention in Greece had become so strong that the COS chose to disagree with the analysis in a report by their Deputy Director of Military Intelligence P.G. Whitefourd, who calculated the Germans might advance as rapidly in Greece as they had in other theatres, or progress at a sufficient pace to outmatch any force the British could assemble in time.[37] They also ignored a report by Military Intelligence 3, which concluded that Greece was likely to fall within weeks if the Germans attacked. Indeed, they were so committed to the idea of sending a force to Greece that they chose to disregard concerns over the shortage of available shipping to take the soldiers from Egypt to Greece and discounted the importance that a shortage of suitable airfields and communications to accommodate a larger RAF force would have on the campaign.[38] Instead, the COS concluded that 'the pace of the German advance will be limited by the difficulties and dangers of crossing the Danube, and by the state of the roads at the time of the year.'

Peter Ewer has argued that the COS may also have been influenced by the optimism of Major General T.G.G. Heywood's Military Mission in Athens. Heywood's official role was to train Greek soldiers and facilitate supplies and preparations to destroy oil stocks in the event of a German attack.[39] After the debacle in Greece Heywood became a convenient scapegoat for the failure of British intervention and his death in an air crash in 1943 ensured he could not reply to the charges made against him. Heywood had correctly assessed that the Greeks were gambling on German non-intervention[40] and judged that the loss of Salonika and railway connectivity would isolate the Greek Northern Corps, slowing any redeployment to counter any German threat, which would place additional challenges on the atrocious Greek infrastructure.[41] Brigadier Arthur (Guy) Salisbury-Jones, Heywood's GSO1 in Athens, claimed that the Military Mission had warned Cairo about 'the risks of the situation and the state of the Greek Army as regards equipment, morale and strength.[42] Nevertheless, the Military Mission, composed of mostly army personnel, also advised the War Office 'that the mountainous nature of the Balkan theatre did not give the same scope to German mechanised forces as did the country in Western Europe.'[43]

The Joint Planning Staff in Cairo were set against intervention, believing it unlikely to succeed. But Wavell's initial scepticism about the potential success of intervention in Greece began to recede as the political pressure on him, from Eden in particular, increased. He agreed with the COS in London that Whitefourd's analysis that the Germans would advance quickly was 'unduly optimistic'.[44] Wavell also brushed aside the warnings by Brigadier Shearer, Director of Military Intelligence for the Middle East, about the enormous dangers and risks of such a campaign.[45] Wavell was much taken by Donovan's belief that if Greece was secured it could provide a

forward lodgement base from which to attack Germany from the south when the opportunity arose.[46] In mid-February, Wavell advised Eden, Dill and the COS that 'very few aircraft could be sent to Greece now that the Luftwaffe had appeared in force in the Mediterranean and losses were rising.[47] Given Wavell's earlier views the success of the land campaign in Greece would depend on effective air support it is surprising that so little importance was give to the RAF's ability to compete against the well-equipped GAF units arranged against them, particularly as the importance of aircraft over the battlefield had so recently been etched into the minds of British soldiers. Wavell knew that the few RAF squadrons in Greece were composed of mostly obsolete aircraft, that they would be outnumbered and outmatched by the GAF, and yet he chose to ignore the reality that the RAF would be unable to provide the support the army thought necessary in the Bartholomew Report. It was 1949 before Wavell acknowledged that he had failed to see the impact GAF air superiority would have on the Greek campaign.[48]

Wavell therefore disregarded the negative assessments coming from the Cairo-based Joint Planning Staff, his own intelligence experts and the RAF and instead choose to believe the positive assessments coming from London, the flawed appreciation of Eden and the grandiose opinions of Donovan, a non-allied foreign national. Instead, he agreed with the Military Mission assessment in concluding that the terrain in Greece would slow down any German advance, that his forces in Greece would have time to prepare the necessary defensive positions. All of which led him to the conclusion that British Army intervention in Greece should be supported: a *volte-face* that astonished and exasperated members of the Joint Planning Staff.[49] The extent to which his decision was influenced by the impact of Churchill's concern about his ability and the option to remove him and replace him with Freyberg is difficult to determine, but it would be reasonable to assume that it had some impact on his evaluation of the positive and negative aspects of the proposed campaign.

The British Army in Greece and the RAF's Inability to Secure Control of the Air

In February 1941 the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park broke the German Railway Enigma and the German intention to attack Greece became apparent.[50] Though Longmore was not at that time aware of the source of the intelligence he had to determine whether the RAF's small and obsolete forces in Greece could deny the GAF control of the air. Longmore's command spanned Egypt, Sudan, Palestine and Transjordan, East Africa, Aden and Somaliland, Iraq and adjacent territories, Cyprus, Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Given the range and breadth of his responsibilities it is understandable that he felt constrained by his lack of resources. Moreover, D'Albiac had reiterated his complaints about the poor state of the airfields and their road access, which he felt were barely adequate to maintain and operate his small force, never mind grow it. Though the slowness in improving the Greek airfields might be explained by Greek concerns about provoking the Germans, they were also struggling with the poor regional infrastructure. In Bulgaria bridges were too weak to take the heavy equipment and had to be strengthened, impeding their speed of progress. In Romania heavy snow forced the suspension of all transport movements

and the airfields were under water.[51] Indeed, the roads were so bad that the German advance suffered an attrition rate in their motorized columns of 35% after only two weeksof hostilities.[52] The problem therefore was to evaluate what could be done to mitigate the RAF's weaknesses while recognising that increasing the number of RAF squadrons in Greece would compound the logistic and communications difficulties already encountered. On 21 February 1941, Longmore told Eden of his worries about the RAF's qualitative and quantitative ability to match the GAF. Eden was sufficiently worried that this might tip the balance and make British army intervention in Greece untenable. He signalled Churchill with this message:

> "Gravest anxiety is not in respect of army but of air. There is no doubt that need to fight a German Air Force instead of Italian is creating a new problem for Longmore. Many good (troop)ers are still mounted on wretched horses. We should all have liked to approach Greece tomorrow with a suggestion that we should join with them in holding a line to defend Salonica but both Longmore and Cunningham are convinced that our present resources will not allow us to do this."[53]

Clearly, the key British representatives discussing possible British Army intervention in Greece were fully aware that the RAF would be unable to control the air over Salonika. On 22 February 1941 a conference convened at the Greek King's Palace at Tatoi, outside Athens, with Eden, Dill, Wavell, Longmore, Heywood, two secretaries and three Staff Officers met King George, Kitrilakis - the Greek Premier and General Alexander Papagos in attendance.[54] The Greeks were still nervous about provoking the Germans. To encourage them Eden directed de Guingand to manipulate the manpower and gun totals the British Army could commit to Greece in order to mislead the Greeks into believing they could expect stronger British Army support than was actually available.[55] When Eden asked for a military appraisal of the proposed coalition operation Wavell took centre stage. Though his staff had advised that the campaign was not militarily viable he announced that British Army intervention in Greece was a reasonable military venture and reiterated General Wolfe's famous dictum: "War is an option of difficulties. We go".[56] Longmore said nothing about the likely consequences of losing control of the air to the GAF. Air Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, Longmore's deputy, noted how the political desire to intercede had been carried forward with intent, like a baton, by the military.[57] Operational and administrative orders for British Troops Greece (BTG), better known as 'W' Force, after their commander Lieutenant General Henry Maitland Wilson, were promulgated.[58]

Longmore's decision to stay silent and yield to the politicians' desires on military matters was 'in character' as earlier he had shown his willingness to defer to the Air Ministry in deciding operational policy in the Greek theatre. He might have seen the impact of the political pressure applied to Wavell by Churchill and Eden and, given the response from Churchill and Portal to his complaints about the lack of aircraft his command received, may have simply chosen not to rock the boat. Eden was certainly intent on securing the intervention of British land forces in Greece and, according to de Guingand, he and his staff considered the agreement at Tatoi for British Army involvement a diplomatic coup.[59] Wavell may also have

been influenced by Heywood's positive reports about the Greek army's performance against the Italians. The enduring perception of the meeting, as transmitted back to the War Cabinet, focused on Wavell's positivity about the prospects for the ensuing military campaign. Indeed, so strong was the positive impression generated that the decision to continue prevailed even after an option to stop the expedition, whilst it was in transit, presented itself.[60] The British had forgotten to tell the Greeks that the Yugoslavs had chosen not to become involved and, instead, to exercise the 'do nothing option'. This delayed the Greeks' move to the Aliakmon line.[61] At a stroke this error ensured the British and Greek coalition lost the second race they were running against the Germans.

An Alternative Strategic Option – Attack Romanian Oil

The British knew that German reliance on the output of Romanian oil fields was a critical vulnerability because its Industrial Intelligence Centre (IIC) had identified Romania as the sole source from which Germany could meet her petroleum requirements.[62] As early as 1939 a War Office department linked to the Special Intelligence Service (MI6), had set up sabotage organisations that had planned to disrupt Romanian oil supplies to Germany, but these small-scale operations failed[63] and Romanian oil exports to Germany had steadily increased.[64] In late May 1940 Wavell had proposed to London that British support for Greece should include an attempt to deny the flow of Romanian oil to Germany. In November 1940 the head of the Military Mission in Greece was told that one aim of British intervention was to facilitate the potential to attack the Romanian oilfields. Later that month the Secretary of State for Air was asked to report on the suitability of airfields in Greece as bases for possible action against Romanian oil.[65] On 20 January 1941 Hitler, thinking the Russian threat greater than the British, told his generals 'Now in the era of air power Russia can turn the Romanian oilfields into an expanse of smoking debris .... and the very life of the Axis depends on those fields.'[66]

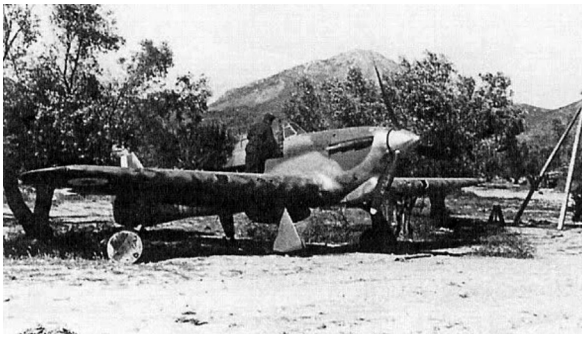
Britain's Foreign Office thought the threat of losing Romanian oil might deter the Germans from attacking Greece.[67] Therefore, when the Germans entered Romania the British persuaded themselves that they had done so to protect the oilfields until, that is, ULTRA revealed their intention was to pacify Greece.[68] Why then, were the oilfields not attacked in 1941? The main reason was because the Greeks were still under the impression that they could compartmentalise and separate their war with the Italians from the wider World War: by fighting the Italians without having to fight the Germans. Hence, they told the British that only after a wider coalition with Yugoslavia and Turkey had been secured, and Italy defeated would they consider allowing the British to attack Romanian oilfields. Consequently, Churchill sought to secure Turkish support so that the oilfields could be attacked from its territory.[69] On 21 February, a day before the Tatoi Conference, it was clear that the German invasion of Greece was imminent so the idea of bombing the German oil supplies in Romania reappeared on the agenda, but Dill told the War Office it could not happen because bad weather would make it necessary to violate Turkish airspace.[70] As events accelerated to their conclusion the timing of any attacks against Romanian oil became important. On 24 February Eden and Dill received a brief at the British Embassy in Athens, which recommended a heavy night bomber squadron be sent out,

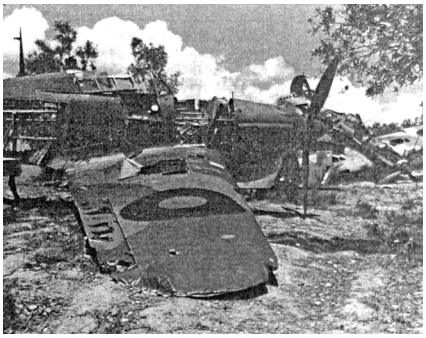
via Malta, to attack Ploesti oil targets between 6 and 20 March.[71] An attack from Malta would not need Greek or Turkish approval. It was 3 years later, in the summer of 1944, before RAF Wellington bombers flew night missions against Ploesti, from Italy, in support of the USAAF daylight bombing operations.[72] In 1941 Bomber Command crews might have lacked the technical ability to navigate to the target by night, but the risks of attempting a surprise attack would have been negligible in comparison with the losses suffered in the ensuing land campaign in Greece.

Grand Strategic Thinking Meets Operational Reality

It was April 1941 before the War Cabinet realised that only a quarter of the aircraft it thought it was sending to the Middle East actually arrived.[73] This explains why, in March 1941, Longmore's grievances that he did not have the number or quality of aircraft necessary irked Churchill. On 24 March 1941 Churchill told him 'I have been concerned to read your continual complaints of the numbers of aircraft which are sent to you.'[74] Though the RAF decided to extend the RAF's presence in Greece to fourteen squadrons to arrive between 15 January and 15 April 1941[75] D'Albiac only had eleven squadrons when the Germans attacked on 6 April 1941 and some of these were mixed types (6 Blenheim sqns; 2 Hurricane sqns; one and a half Gladiator sqns; a sqn of Wellingtons and half a sqn of Lysander aircraft). Of the nominally declared 208 aircraft only around 80 were serviceable.[76] The Australian official history recorded 'Since the German attack opened the three squadrons of the Eastern Wing of the British air force had not only hampered the German advance but had been the most reliable source of information about the enemy's movements.'[77] The significantly outnumbered RAF did what it could with the mainly obsolete aircraft it had at its disposal but it was not enough.

So, given the relative imbalance of the forces positioned in Greece it should have been no surprise when the token RAF force, with its mostly obsolete aircraft, configured to fight the relatively weak Italian air force, were totally outmatched and destroyed by the GAF that confronted it. In the ensuing debacle D'Albiac struggled to react and respond to the GAF's offensive counter air campaign to secure control of the air. Indeed, despite the hopelessness of the task he attempted to abide by his orders, received from Longmore on 11 April 1941, to keep his force fighting as long as the Greeks kept fighting.[78] It was always an unequal struggle; in one raid alone the Luftwaffe destroyed sixteen Blenheim bombers on the ground and fourteen Hurricane fighters. On 13 April 1941 a formation of six Blenheim medium bombers from 211 Sqn, tasked to attack enemy transport were shot down by Bf 109s and two days later short-range German fighters destroyed all of 113 Squadron's Blenheim aircraft at Niamata.[79] Later that day D'Albiac personally saw two Hurricanes destroyed at Larissa.[80] It became necessary for all RAF and Greek aircraft to be based outside the range of GAF short-range fighters, or be annihilated. After only a week of fighting D'Albiac's force had dwindled from 200 to 46 aircraft and had ceased to be an effective fighting force. On 17 April D'Albiac decided to evacuate the surviving bomber squadrons to Crete and send the fighters to Athens.[81] Four days later he ordered Air Commodore Grigson to take charge of the RAF fighter rear-guard in the Peloponnese and evacuate any RAF personnel who had missed the opportunity to leave Greece from the Athens area.[82]





Argos - A 33 Sqn Hurricane 'hidden' and the scene after the strafing

Grigson's task was unenviable and it is clear from his subsequent report that his responsibilities in the evacuation, beyond general guidance to provide support for the army evacuation, were ill defined. Consequently, even though he must have been well aware of the vulnerability of the aircraft for which he was responsible, he felt obliged to keep them on the Greek mainland at Argos in an attempt to provide a degree of air cover for the Army's evacuation to Crete and Egypt. Given the GAF did not fly at night when the Navy evacuated the Imperial forces from Greece it may have been more possible to provide a greater degree of cover, when the ships were in range, from Crete. Instead, Grigson ignored pleas from his fighter pilots to extricate the fighters to Crete with the entirely predictable outcome that fourteen Hurricanes were destroyed, thirteen of them while they were on the ground, on the afternoon of 23 April.[83] It would have been difficult for Grigson to ignore his orders and dispatch the Hurricanes to Crete; he was more comfortable playing the hero, shooting at the German aircraft attacking Argos as though he were on a grouse moor.[84] Grigson's determination to meet his obligations had blinded him to the operational necessities. Only after the attack did he acknowledge that there was no hope of supporting the evacuations with his fighters based on the Greek mainland and sent the remaining seven Hurricanes to Crete. Blenheim 'fighters' covered the army's evacuation. Hurricane losses at Argos affected the RAF's ability to provide air cover in the defence of Crete. Nevertheless, despite serious losses to shipping the GAF failed to seriously disrupt the evacuations.

RAF Hate - Blame and Resentment after German Victory

Although Longmore's warnings about the RAF's inability to compete with the GAF were brushed aside by those who chose to think that air power would not be a decisive factor in the campaign, it was the RAF which came under the greatest immediate scrutiny for the defeat and evacuation in Greece. Before his 'W Force' had been committed to the campaign Wilson had told the American Ambassador in Athens, Lincoln MacVeagh, that the Greek terrain would even up the military ledger and that the Germans could not repeat their Polish and French successes on account of the terrain[85] but his campaign report claimed it had been 'quite wrong to attempt to compete with the German army without an adequate air force,' … to be subjected to a 'German air force allowed full liberty of action.'[86] As well as failing to acknowledge Longmore's warnings that the RAF would be unable to compete with the GAF

to secure control of the air, Wilson also overlooked the appreciation provided by his 'W' Force staff which had concluded that the Germans could be beaten if proper advantage were taken of the terrain and that topographical features would mitigate the impact of German close air support and, in particular, the dive bomber.[87] The reality, of course, was very different. David Belchem recorded that 'by day the German Stukas and Messerschmitts hit us with complete impunity; one Australian convoy, on the road south of Thermopylae, was attacked from the air seven times in two hours. The effect on the steadiness of the troops, of the air superiority of the Luftwaffe, can be well imagined.'[88] Blaming the RAF for his Force's failure may have been a convenient way for Wilson to attempt to retain his reputation.

Proportionately the RAF experienced almost four times the casualty rate of the British Army in the Greek campaign,[89] yet a negative impression of the RAF's fighting spirit and performance in Greece was allowed to fester. Some soldiers evacuated from Greece felt so aggrieved that the RAF was not protecting them that they instigated a number of 'incidents' in Alexandria against RAF personnel.[90] The Australian Brigade was less severe in judging its own performance. In the Monastir Gap, a valley running from Monastir to the Greek city of Florina, the Liebstandarte SS Adolf Hitler Regiment and elements of the 9th Panzer Division dislodged the much larger 19th Australian Brigade, causing it to retreat in disorder. Significantly, the GAF only appeared after the rout began.[91] A few Army officers were so convinced of the RAF's failings that they chose to criticise it in writing. General Smith forwarded to Air Marshal Tedder three letters from senior Army officers complaining of the RAF's poor dispersal plans. According to Brigadier Galloway aircraft were lost in the Larissa area 'despite the fact that General Wilson personally warned the RAF of what was likely to happen'. Another wrote that aircraft were lost at Argos through putting them in Olive groves where they were only half hidden.' The third, Salisbury-Jones, complained about 'the disastrous casualties to aircraft that had occurred in Greece, particularly at Argos.'[92]

Clearly, the willingness to blame the RAF for its apparent absence, and for what had happened to the Army was widespread. RAF doctor, Flight Lieutenant Griffin, was so affected by the overt animosity he encountered that he reported Lieutenant Colonel Kerridge's vitriolic verbal attack after Kerridge had stopped Griffin's ambulance two miles North of Argos.[93] It is interesting to speculate whether such attitudes were in some way responsible for the exclusion of nearly a thousand RAF ground crew and administration personnel from the distribution list of evacuation instructions at Argos and the way they were reported to be 'getting out of hand' as their hope of escape diminished and German air attacks increased.[94] Whatever the feelings at the time it is clear, however, that Grigson's decision not to evacuate the Hurricanes to Crete and their subsequent destruction reduced the RAF's ability to protect some of the forces being evacuated and, ultimately, the defence of Crete. However, Tedder, when writing to VCAS Air Chief Marshal Wilfrid Freeman on 25 Apr 41, supported Grigson's actions and claimed that the whole thing was a question of sheer numbers.[95] His letter also expressed concern that there will be some bitter feeling against the RAF on the part of the soldiers. A month later, after the fall of Crete, Tedder remarked:

> 'There is as I expected, a first-class hate working up in the Army against the Royal Air Force for having 'let them down' in Greece and Crete.'[96]

Some Australian officers acknowledged that their soldiers exhibited considerable fear when encountering German aircraft[97] and their willingness to place the blame on the RAF for their vulnerability was probably a consequence of the widespread psychological fear the German aircraft had induced. Morale can be understood as the willingness of an individual or group to prepare for and engage in institutionally encouraged actions. When morale is broken it can lead to a gradual, though distinct, erosion of the willingness to fight. It may be true that the German bombing of the retreating columns did not produce immediate results; the GAF failed to close the main road at Lamia, the main highway on which the retreat was concentrated.[98] Nevertheless, it is clear that the psychological effect of the GAF attacks led the soldiers to believe that the GAF had been a decisive factor in the German military victory and to deduce that the RAF was responsible for their defeat. Troops from New Zealand amended the army's choice of the RAF's epitaph from Dunkirk 'Royal Absent Force' to 'Rare As Fairies'.[99] Clearly, the soldiers and sailors involved in the Greek debacle had appreciated the importance of gaining and maintaining control of the air, whatever the terrain. It was a very expensive lesson to have to learn: British losses in Greece were 903 killed; 1,250 wounded; 13,958 prisoners; 52 Light tanks and 52 Cruiser tanks; 40 AA guns; 192 Field guns; 164 anti-tank guns; 1,812 machine guns; 8,000 lorries of various types and virtually all radio equipment; 26 ships sunk and 209 RAF aircraft lost.[100]

The Enduring Importance of Controlling the Air to Influence Behaviour

Some historians have argued that though the campaign in Greece was a defeat it was worthwhile because it delayed the German attack on the Soviet Union.[101] Churchill and Eden wanted to attack the Germans through the Balkans and were happy to put pressure on the military commanders to find ways to do so. Churchill frequently visited the 11 Group operations bunker at the height of the Battle of Britain, so he ought to have known how the combination of modern fighters based at well-equipped airfields, coordinated by an integrated air defence system enabled the RAF to deny the GAF control of the air over England. Instead, he and the War Cabinet assumed the RAF would be able to repeat the heroics of the Battle of Britain, even though they were largely equipped with obsolete aircraft.[102] Wavell appeared unconcerned about the impact of losing the air war when he underwent his volte-face. The Greeks fully understood the importance of the oilfields in Romania and worried how any RAF threat to them would play out, but the RAF's interest in attacking Ploesti, despite its repeated reappearance on the agenda, was inexplicably lethargic. When more Wellington bombers became available in early March 1941 D'Albiac preferred to continue to attack targets in the Adriatic and in the War Cabinet Portal claimed that bombing Romania in March would be difficult due to poor weather.[103]

Some recent analysis of the impact the GAF had on the campaign in Greece has concluded that air attacks were limited in their material effectiveness, making them largely ineffective in

producing results on the battlefield,[104] but such arguments are excessively focused on the physical component of warfighting: measuring performance, in terms of the number of vehicles destroyed and the ability to close the main escape route. This paper has attempted to show how the inability of the RAF to challenge for control of the air enabled the GAF to inflict significant psychological damage on British and Dominion troops affecting their 'will to fight', helping the spread of panic, fear, confusion and hysteria during the retreat and subsequent evacuation out of all proportion to the damage caused by the actual attacks. A better measure of the effect air power had in the campaign in Greece, therefore, would be to assess the morale of those under attack and examine how this influenced their 'will to fight': the moral component of war fighting, because the will of an opponent to fight, when successfully undermined, is very 'effective' in delivering results. This British Army had had the same experience in France in 1940, as described eloquently by Marc Bloch:

> It can so work upon the nerves that they become wrought to a pitch of intolerable tension whence it is a very short step to panic . . . No matter how thickly bombs may be sown, they never, in fact register hits on more than a relatively small number of men. But the effect of bombing on the nerves is far reaching, and can break the potential of resistance over a large area.[105]

Tangible proof of apparent GAF success might also acknowledge the soldiers' reaction in blaming the RAF for allowing it to happen.[106] Whether or not the attacks on the RAF and its personnel were an overt attempt to divert the responsibility for the poor performance of the British and Dominion troops in the Greek campaign they certainly re-ignited the ever-present but latent debate between the Army and the RAF about which organisation should own and control tactical air assets. The Army felt so aggrieved it reiterated its demand for its own organic air support. If the Army had control over the aircraft available in Greece it is extremely unlikely that the result would have been any different; all Army cooperation aircraft were shot down by the end of the second day of battle with the GAF.[107] First, as Longmore repeatedly complained, the air resources were very limited; the Army would have had to contend with the same unequal fight. Second, when planning the Army intervention in Greece only Wavell amongst the Army commanders involved appeared to grasp the important impact air power would have on the subsequent campaign; that is before he conveniently decided to forget his own assessment. So, the analysis of the inter-service report on the campaign correctly concluded that the subordination of RAF elements to the ground commander in Greece would probably have made little difference to the outcome of the campaign.[108]

Wavell and Longmore ought to have advised that the campaign in Greece was untenable, but both men were under pressure from Churchill and Eden and both ignored the reasoned advice of their staffs. Longmore's reports about his lack of resources were accurate but he knew that repeating them irritated Churchill, sufficiently for Portal to admonish him[109] and so he may have felt compelled to go along with the political desire to create a Balkan Front and to ignore his military judgement. The excessive and intrusive political pressure placed on Wavell,

together with Longmore's willingness to fall under the influence of Eden, led to the ludicrous decision to send a British Army to Greece. Longmore, who hoped historians might judge his achievements favourably,[110] was recalled to London, ostensibly to attend two Chiefs-of-Staffs meetings. He dined with Churchill who probably thought him another difficult general. He was sacked soon afterwards. Air Marshal Owen Boyd was chosen as Longmore's replacement but on his way to the Middle East his aircraft became lost and landed in Sicily where he was taken prisoner. Tedder became C-in-C Air for the Middle East.

Concluding Thoughts

The British desire to honour the 1939 guarantee to Greece led them to offer a level of military support the Greeks did not really want because the Greeks feared significant British support might remove any chance of compartmentalising their war with the Italians and cause them to become involved in the wider war against the Germans, which was likely to result in defeat and occupation. Into this mix the British political leaders tried to impose their grand strategic illusions on the overburdened military leaders who were already fully engaged across many areas of responsibility. Churchill thought Wavell lacked dynamism, a consequence of their very different personalities and, to some extent, Freyberg's disloyal analysis of his Middle East Command. This helped to create a toxic environment in which Wavell felt increasingly pressured to submit to the political will to intervene militarily although the objectives he attempted to achieve were unrealistic and unachievable.

The pressure on Wavell was further compounded by the arrival of Eden who appeared to relish his role of shuttle diplomat, trying to create a regional coalition against Germany. Eden badly misjudged the regional dynamics; despite persistent evidence to the contrary he believed that a coalition against the Germans was still possible.[111] The War Cabinet, therefore, were drip fed positive military assessments of likely success which tallied with the aspirations of Churchill and Eden, until Eden eventually recognised the fallacy of his hopes for a regional coalition. By then the War Cabinet had been moved by Wavell's apparent positivity to think the campaign entirely viable. Longmore should shoulder some of the blame for how this situation arose. Though he tried to advise Wavell, Eden and London of the dangers of losing control of the air over Greece he allowed his worries about the prospects for the air war to become marginalised and ignored. By not expressing his case with sufficient vigour he missed his chance to help avoid catastrophe by failing to articulate his concerns at the crucial meeting with the Greeks at Tatoi on 22 February 1941. Had Longmore been less deferential to Eden's grand strategic illusions the Greeks might have rejected British assistance and Churchill, who had slowly but surely realised how tenuous the prospects really were when after the Greek troop repositioning debacle became apparent,[112] might have managed to pass off the Greek collapse as the consequence of a grossly unequal struggle.

The resultant military disaster was entirely predictable, yet by blaming the defeat on the absence of the RAF some in the Army tried to distance themselves from their own earlier analysis: that air and tank supported all arms warfare would have little impact on the campaign

due to the terrain. German control of the air had once again enabled unimpeded attacks against troops on the ground, which generated fear and induced feelings of helplessness and overmatch. German air attacks on British forces in Greece may not have caused significant loss of life or equipment but they helped induce psychological effects that enabled German victory and caused the British significant losses of personnel and equipment.

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