

ROBIN HIGHAM

BRITISH INTERVENTION IN GREECE 1940-1941:  
THE ANATOMY OF A GRAND DECEPTION

INTRODUCTION

Shortly before the Second World War began the British and French governments gave a guarantee to Greece based upon the presence of a French army in Syria and the British navy in the Eastern Mediterranean. No plans were drafted then for action in case the guarantee should be invoked. It lapsed of course when France fell in June 1940. But in September the British unilaterally renewed it in response to practical inquiries from General Ioannis Metaxas, the then President of the Council in Athens. The reassuring gesture made little sense since the British were in such a parlous position. They were even having difficulties supplying coal for the Greek railways, at that time the Ptolemais fields being undiscovered. Though the British had camped about Salonika for the latter part of the First World War, they knew little about Greece and had few maps of it<sup>1</sup>. They had never systematically collected information on the country, which hung in their minds somewhat hazily between the Balkans and the Levant. It is scarcely surprising to find, therefore, that they had no grand strategy for southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean.

Though there were some connections between the Royal Navy and the Royal Hellenic Navy, and with the Royal Hellenic Air Force (RHAF), the Greek Army and Air Force were equipped with French, Czech and Polish arms all entirely incompatible with British equipment. Nor had the British any idea of the economic or physical geography

Professor Higham of Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, USA, is Editor of the three quarterlies *Military Affairs*, *Aerospace Historian*, and *Journal of the West*, as well as being a member of the editorial boards of *Technology and Culture*, the Conference of British Studies, and of the International Military History Commission, and a Corresponding Member of the Council of the Society for Army Historical Research, London. The author of several books, he has just finished a full-length manuscript on the British decision to aid Greece, which he started in 1966.

1. Alan Palmer, *The Gardeners of Salonika* (London, 1965). As Major Miles Reid records in *Last on the List* (London: 1974, 1979), the first weeks of his special reconnaissance team's work were largely devoted to making maps in the southern part of Greece.

of the country. The economic meant close ties with Germany, whose engineers, for instance, were deeply involved in the telephone and cable systems, and the physical an incomprehension of the nature and size of Greece and ignorance of the fact that there was just one standard gauge railway line running from Athens north and only one main road suitable for motorized units. There were also only two usable deep water ports of any size — the Piraeus and Salonika, with a less developed harbor at Volos<sup>2</sup>.

It is important to remember that during the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941 military technology was in transition. In many ways the weapons and methods used were still those of the 1914-1918 rather than of the 1939-1945 War<sup>3</sup>. The first radar sets, for instance, only began to reach the Mediterranean theater early in 1941. ULTRA, the top secret decrypts of German Air Force wireless traffic, is only identifiable from 5 April 1941, when it was fed directly to General Maitland Wilson commanding the British troops in Greece<sup>4</sup>. Landing craft and ships were not available. Aircraft still operated from unreinforced grass airfields, weather permitting, and wireless sets were so unreliable that they would not work at certain hours of the day or night and not in the mountain valleys. Many of these things, when coupled as well to medical problems, meant that operations in Greece were about at the level that today would be described as those of the Third World<sup>5</sup>.

### *The First Moves - the Air Factor*

The immediate British response to the Italian attack on Greece on 28 October 1940 was to order the despatch of No. 30 Blenheim

2. A great deal of information is contained in the Reports of the British Military Mission which are to be found both in the Foreign Office (FO 371/24920, 371/29814, 371/33145, 371/29816, 371/29815, 371/29777, 371/29782) files and in the various War Office WO 106 and 201 series in the Public Records Office in London.

3. On this general topic see my essay in Deutsches Marine Institut, *Seemacht und Geschichte: festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag von Friedrich Ruge* (Bonn, 1975), «Weapons Old and Weapons New: Technology at D-Day», 123-132.

4. A lot of valuable insights as well as confirmations of British Intelligence activities and attitudes can be found in F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, I (London, 1979). German Army codes were not broken till 1942.

5. Medical histories are a much overlooked source. In this case the 1918 Macedonian experience was communicated from South Africa to the Prime Minister (Allan S. Walker, *Clinical Problems of War* (Canberra, 1952)). See also F.A.E. Crew, *The Army Medical Services - Campaigns I* (London, 1956).

«mixed» fighter and bomber and No. 84 bomber squadrons to Athens. These were chosen because the Bristol Blenheim was the only machine that Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, the AOC-in-C Middle East thought at first he could spare. Moreover it had the advantage that it could be flown non-stop from airfields in Egypt to Athens without having to make a stop in Crete where hand refuelling from four-gallon petrol tins would take about two-and-a-half hours on an airfield only some 100 miles from the Italians at Scarpanto in the Dodecanese. As it was the Bristol Bombay bomber-transport which accompanied the Blenheims and carried the spares, luggage and airmen, had to risk a stop in Crete. Indicative of the state of British knowledge of Greece was the sending of the airmen in No. 30 squadron with two blankets apiece, which was all very well in the Egyptian desert in November, but not nearly good enough around Athens. So when the first flight of No. 84 left on 7 November each airman carried six blankets, of which two, presumably were for his mate in No. 30<sup>6</sup>.

This early British air assistance was really more symbolic than real. In the first place, except for fighter patrols flown from 7 November onwards by Blenheims, the bombers only sortied 123 times that month<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, their loads were minimal as the heaviest bomb they carried was the standard 250-lb., and only four of those, while on some occasions they only carried 40-lbers. Moreover, they could not operate in daylight except with adequate cloud cover, they could not get over the mountains in bad weather, and if they did reach the target areas, there was no guarantee that they really would hit anything significant. Their chief value was to build morale as, after all, Greece was the only ally Britain had who was still fighting on the continent of Europe.

What Metaxas and the Greek government really wanted, and what they strove to get all along, were British supplies so that they could

6. Interestingly this material does not exist in AIR files at the PRO, but may be located in WO 201/89, but then 26 copies of movements orders were cut. For details on squadrons see Philip Moyes, *Bomber Squadrons of the RAF...* (London, 1964, 1976).

7. AIR 24/1666.8299 is RAF Form 540, the log of HQ, British Air Force in Greece as it was originally. Part I is the legal log of who came and went and Part II, made up in London, summarizes daily operations. Wellingtons flew 21 sorties in November grouped in three nights of 6 and 1 of 3. Standing fighter patrols are not easy to record for statistical purposes and the term is used without specific numbers.

re-equip their own soldiers and airmen to drive out the hated Italians without provoking the Germans with whom they had close economic and ideological ties. It was a delicate situation which the doughty Metaxas handled with consummate skill and firmness. Unfortunately, apart from a small amount of captured Italian material transshipped from the Western Desert after Wavell's successful offensive began in December, very little of the desired supplies reached the Greeks<sup>8</sup>. The replenishment of the RHAF is a case in point. By mid-November it was virtually out of action due to losses and unserviceability in spite of operating to minimal standards<sup>9</sup>. Appeals for British replacement aircraft were answered with one delivery of 12 Gloster Gladiator biplane fighters on 6 December 1940, all that Longmore could spare from his already bare cupboard. Attempts to get planes from the United States foundered on bureaucracy in Washington and bad faith in London. But they also were wrecked by technical considerations — there was no ammunition for the American. 50 cal. machine-guns when the out-classed Curtiss P-40's arrived in Egypt so equipped, while the radial-engined version the P-36, suffered from defects which necessitated an engine change before they could be flown. And last but not least, the Greeks were the victims of technical attitudes and cultural bias on the part of the British which denied that a veteran Balkan pilot could switch from a Polish to a British fighter without a three-months course in Iraq<sup>10</sup>. At the bottom of it all was the RAF Middle East's problem that it had more aircraft than pilots. The records are filled with a continuous exchange between Cairo and London of messages on this theme, which in the end resulted in Longmore's recall in May 1941, though London was at fault. It was not until 17 April 1941 that the War Cabi-

8. The Report of the British Military Mission is to be found in WO 201/119 and it gives a tally for what it handed over.

9. For a capsule history of the RHAF in English see *Aerospace Historian* (Fall 1974), «Greek Combat Aviation», 129-138. There were 11 squadrons to support the army, of which 3 were obsolete, and 3 for maritime duties. Most airfields in existence then are described by the Air Staff historian as «doubtful if not utterly impractical» (page 133). On the pitiful attempt to rearm the RHAF see G. E. Patrick Murray, «'Under Urgent Consideration': American Planes for Greece, 1940-1941», *Aerospace Historian* (Summer 1977), 61-69. For the state of the Greek AF at the time see the reports of the Military Mission in WO 201/100 etc. and Sir Michael Palairot, the Ambassador's, telegrams to the Foreign Office in FO 371/24920, etc.

10. D'Albiac's reports are in AIR 23/6370 and in the *London Gazette*, No. 37846, 7 January 1947, 205-216. Tedder's comments are in AIR 23/811.

net in London noted that while since November 1940 they had allocated 1785 aircraft to the Middle East, only 905 had been sent and of these only 377 had actually arrived by that date<sup>11</sup>.

Once the RAF did get to Greece, there was a serious problem of airfields. While they always based a squadron at Eleusis near Athens, it was not at that time an all-weather airfield and when it rained neither the Bristol Blenheims nor the Vickers Wellingtons, the heavy bombers flown in for occasional operations, could operate from there. In early 1941, for instance, Eleusis was closed on 3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14-18, 23, 24, 26-27, 29 and 30 January (16 days) because the airfield, rather than the aircraft, was unserviceable. Nor was there any airfield-building equipment available in the Middle East because the practice there was to pick firm sand, and bulldozers were not yet available as military equipment. So the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell, had urgently to request that airfield-construction companies be sent out from the United Kingdom. In the meantime, surveyors were allowed to seek airfield sites south of a line running east and west through Mount Olympus, but not in the vital Salonika area until after Metaxas's death at the end of January 1941, when surveys alone progressed. Even after these had been agreed, a severe shortage of labour in a Greece already being drained to the bottom of the barrel by the struggle against the Italians prevented the recruitment of man or womanpower to construct fields. The Germans in May 1941 had the advantages of being conquerors, of a demobilized people, and of better weather so they could build their fields rapidly in preparation for the assault on Crete. Later in the war the availability of both the bulldozer and of PSP (perforated steel plate) made it possible to lay waterproof runways in days. The upshot of the lack of airfield building facilities was that when the Germans attacked on 6 April, the RAF had only 11 squadrons (3 of them fighters) in Greece because it did not have space for any more. And of these the Air Ministry did not know the location of four<sup>12</sup>.

Equally critical was the lack of a Royal Observer Corps system or any other type of early-warning network, including radar. The only thing that was available in Greece was the telephone system, and it

11. Much of this is covered in *Cabinet Telegrams: Middle East*, multi-volumes within a multi-volume set with separate pagination, in Cabinet papers in the CAB 65 series, and in some AIR sets. For the detailed figures CAB 65/22, 17 April 1941.

12. AIR 24/1670.8299, 1 April 1941.

was useless for warning messages as it took up to six hours to get through. Owing to mountains, many airfields were cut off from radio contact with forward observers, and so the first warning they had of an impending attack was when the enemy aircraft swooped into sight, often at too close range for even fighters to be scrambled. It was a situation such as this coupled with mistakes in directions which saw 14 out of 20 Hurricanes wiped out on one of two airfields at Argos on 23 April<sup>13</sup> while the anti-aircraft gunners protected the other. The alternative solution was standing patrols, and they were too costly and depended upon a control system which was not available.

Lack of airfields contributed in another way to casualties. When aircraft were damaged or had a failure in the air, they had sometimes to seek out the nearest landing area. With no suitable recovery vehicles available, if the aircraft came down in some remote spot, it was abandoned there and the crew walked out. In part this was because recovery away from airfields was a subject which at that stage of the war had not yet been recognized as vital, since in peacetime a write-off was an asset because it enabled the service to acquire a new machine.

One last aspect of the technological side of air operations must be noted. As early as 13 July 1940 the Germans were taking high altitude photographs of Athens and other parts of Greece. These were gathered by special Junkers Ju-86P pressurized aircraft flying at 33,000 to 39,000 feet. Their presence was denied by the Greek authorities, perhaps both for diplomatic and for public-relations reasons, while they were incorrectly identified by British A/A gunners as Heinkel 111's. In any case, they were operating with impunity well above the reach of either the guns or the fighters. The clock in the camera on 19 January 1941 shows that the aircraft spent two-and-a-half hours over Athens on a series of leisurely photographic runs<sup>14</sup>. In this PRU work the Germans were clearly superior; however, their interpretation and use of the intelligence was not as good as that of the British. As far as Athens was concerned, of course, it did not matter, as the Nazi ambassador and military attachés were free to operate there anyway.

13. Sources vary on the figures; these are the Air Ministry's in AIR 24/1670. AVM D'Albiac, the AOC British Forces Greece, gives 13 out of 15. But action was very confused at the end.

14. Photos in the National Archives Cartographic Section, Washington, D.C., GR 113.SD, 19.1.41. An earlier series was taken on 13.7.40. Request by latitude and longitude.

Remembering that a sortie was one flight by one aircraft, in the period from 28 October 1940 to 6 April 1941, it was only during direct support for the Greek February offensive that the RAF exceeded 12 sorties a day more than half a dozen times. The Wellington heavy bombers attacking Durazzo, the Italian supply port, actually only carried out 23 sorties in November, 7 in December, 5 in January, 10 in February, and 36 in March. Blenheims were by far the most active aircraft, except perhaps for Gladiators and later Hurricanes on defensive patrols for which the number of sorties are not available. And once the Germans attacked, the myth that British Air Force, Greece, was the RAF of the Battle of Britain, was quickly dispelled when in just over two weeks the force was withdrawn to avoid its complete destruction. It lasted, in fact, only about the same number of days as the RHAFF against the Italians in November<sup>15</sup>.

Where the Wellington force was concerned, there was a proposal, especially in March 1941, that it should be reinforced from England, and used to bomb the Roumanian oilfields. Not only were the Greeks against this for fear of triggering a German attack on Greece, but Longmore was opposed on the very sound and simple grounds that the aircraft themselves could not get over the Bulgarian mountains in winter and would therefore have to fly from Athens up the Dardanelles and thus violate Turkish neutrality, an equally dangerous course<sup>16</sup>. The limitations of technology thus, fortunately, limited strategy.

### *The Role of Crete in Technological Grand Strategy*

The Royal Navy's role in aid to Greece was largely peripheral in that its heavy involvement was in convoying. This is not to say that neither of its victories at Taranto (11 November 1940) and at Cape Matapan (27 March 1941) were not important, but merely to say that the Greek campaign was not its main focus. Yet, the Hellenic world was very much on Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham's mind as he had to detach more and more cruisers to act as fast troopships to make the run to the Piraeus and dip deeper and deeper into his slender flotillas of destroyers to furnish escorts for convoys. One of his constant concerns was the need to refit his destroyers whose boilers were

15. See note 13.

16. Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, I (London, 1970), 518.

getting into a precarious state from many knots at high speeds without proper repairs<sup>17</sup>. His interest in Crete lay in Suda Bay.

Because the RN had always had control over the world's coaling stations and because it had generally been the superior fleet, until the aeroplane suddenly changed the rules in the Mediterranean, the RN had never had to worry about range and replenishment at sea. After 10 June 1940 when Italy entered the war, the Mediterranean was not an Italian lake, but it was no longer a British lagoon either. Submarines and airpower made Malta far less habitable than it had ever been, and so suddenly the British navy faced the need to find an operational base close to Italy, but less vulnerable than Malta. Though Crete could be shuttle bombed by Italian aircraft going back and forth from Italy to the Dodecanese, it was far larger than Malta and offered great possibilities as a bastion on the British right flank of the Middle Eastern position, the belt-buckle of the Empire as Churchill had once called Cairo.

As long as Greece was neutral, Metaxas was very careful not allow any transgressions of that status. But as soon as the Italians attacked, the British were welcomed to Suda Bay and discussions started shortly to turn it into a full-fledged naval base. Immediately the question of anti-aircraft defence arose and the whole question of supplying the guns became entangled in the general paucity of air defences in the Middle East theater. A Mobile Naval Base Defence Organization was called for, but the MNDBO was still in Britain. By the time it was shipped out, Crete had fallen in May 1941. Air Defence needed not only guns, but also fighters and boom defences. A survey team was sent, but the island had six commanders in six months and nothing much was done. The result was that the cruiser *York* was sunk in Suda Bay on 26 March and abandoned on 22 May 1941. But far more importantly, in spite of constant urgings by Prime Minister Churchill himself, airfields had not been built on Crete and the island fell to the Germans in part because the defensive fighters were not there to shoot down the paratroopers' or air-landing troops Junkers Ju-52's, nor were the light bombers there for offensive operations.

Periodically there were mentions made in both London and Cairo that Crete was vital, but in the days before the big battalions, it did not merit a high priority when sandwiched in with all the other equally tenuous positions.

17. A. B. Cunningham, *Sailor's Odyssey* (London, 1948), 276-277.



In October 1940 Anthony Eden, then Secretary of State for War, visited the Middle East and discovered that Wavell was planning a surprise offensive against the superior forces of the Italian Marshal Graziani in the Western Desert for early December. Apparently neither then nor after he returned to London did the British Cabinet or Chiefs of Staff sit down and plot out a grand strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean which took into account the limits of the weapons then available and their restricted supply. If they had, they should surely have given top priority to two considerations. The first was the fortification of Crete to ensure its safety as both the right flankguard and as a link with Greece, which Metaxas for one saw as a future bridgehead for an offensive into Europe. The second was *Operation Mandible*, the seizure of the Dodecanese Islands so as to wipe out the Italian presence in the Levant. The Dodecanese, especially Rhodes, provided the Italians and then the Germans with stepping stones to two vital Near Eastern points — the oil wells of Iraq with the pipeline to Haifa and the Suez Canal. The Germans were well aware of the importance of the islands, using Rhodes as a staging post for highly effective raids against the Canal starting on the night of 16/17 January 1941, of which more later. The British failure to take *Mandible* seriously produced expeditions reminiscent of the Dardanelles in 1915, with the result that the Axis still held the islands in May 1945. And the loss of Crete, in itself «a near run thing», meant that the Germans were a thorn in the side of operations in the Eastern Mediterranean until 1944, because they controlled the air bases there.

Crete fell in part, then, because its importance was never impressed upon the Higher Direction of War in London and Cairo. Thus, when the debacle occurred in Greece in April 1941, Crete was hastily garrisoned with weary, ill-trained, under-armed troops who found nothing prepared.

### *Technical Assistance Declined*

Early in January 1941 General Wavell was ordered to take a break from overseeing O'Connor's victorious desert offensive and visit Athens. He was instructed to offer the maximum British assistance possible. The President of the Council, Metaxas, and the King, George II, agreed to his trip.

Almost as soon as the Italo-Greek War had broken out, the British had despatched a Military Mission to Athens which had superseded

the military attachés. Actually the only one dispossessed to any extent was Colonel Jasper Blunt of the Army, since the Naval Attaché, Rear-Admiral Charles Turle became head of Mission, while the Air Attaché, who was already shared with Ankara, was replaced with British Air Forces Greece headed by Air Commodore, shortly to be Air Vice Marshal, J. H. D'Albiac, who also had an operational command. The job of the Military Mission was to provide aid and advice to the Greeks and to relay their wants to Cairo and London, a task which the ambassador supported with emotional appeals. From the very beginning Wavell had supplied things like socks, boots, jerkins, and the like from his limited stocks as well as some Boys anti-tank rifles. But he was largely helpless to supply much other than captured Italian weapons, ammunition and equipment to Greek forces who were equipped with French, Czech, and Polish arms. It thus became clear fairly early on that, if the Greeks and the British were really going to become an effective force, since the Greeks had no manufacturing capacity other than the Powder Works and a small aircraft factory, that ultimately a start would have to be made with the artillery and to go from there to re-equip the whole Greek Army with British weapons. By late January it was obvious that that time would be before summer<sup>18</sup>. Motor vehicles, on the other hand, were a less serious commodity since they could be interspersed in the system, though as a visiting engineer pointed out, it made most sense to substitute them upon one route at a time so that recovery, repair and spares could be organized in a rational and efficient manner<sup>19</sup>. With or without vehicles, the road system made pack animals essential, even women being recruited for this job in the forward areas. One of the constant worries of the stalwart Greek Commander-in-Chief, General Alexandros Papagos, was that he would not be able to build up sufficient forward dumps of supplies to be able to maintain his momentum on the attack in January and the following months when he sought to knock the Italians out of the war.

It was into this situation that Wavell was reluctantly forced. But like Metaxas, Wavell was a realist. He had written the official history of the Palestine campaign in the First World War and the life of its most successful commander, Lord Allenby. He had a sense for politics, while military affairs bored him. He was, however, unfailingly loyal

18. AIR 8/544.

19. WO 201/10.

and dutiful, if not without a sense of humor<sup>20</sup>. He went to Athens and offered Metaxas British artillery for use against the Italians. He did not offer very much because he could not really spare any. In turning down the offer, the little Greek Moltke, as he was affectionately known in the Army, complimented him on making «the offer of a commander-in-chief». They understood each other. The Greeks wanted the guns, but not the British gunners. They had men, but they lacked material. And as the British liaison officers had warned, the British had to be very careful about offering to teach victorious Greeks how to fight<sup>21</sup>.

Unfortunately, Metaxas was unwell and his heart stopped on 29 January 1941. This led to what appears to be a puzzling metamorphosis in Wavell's policy towards Greece, unless it is assumed that he was skilfully disobeying orders for the common good of Greeks and Britons alike.

Wavell, no stranger to Egypt and a disciple of another great master of deception, Allenby, knew Cairo was a leaky sieve. Very early in February he had the walls in his office hung with maps of Greece and on the 11th orders went out for advance planning and a mass meeting of staff officers. Englishmen are gamblers and the argument can be made that Wavell was gambling on a leak. The real deception was that no one knew his plans. He had a grand strategy which involved O'Connor's thrust in the Western Desert, and cleaning up the Italians in East Africa first to free his forces then engaged in that nearly completed task. Moreover he was a good judge of men. He knew Prime Minister Churchill had created in his own mind in January — quite different from in the Nile Valley in reality — a Central Reserve of four divisions which he was in his usual impetuous way anxious to send into action in some noble cause. Preparing to send it to Greece on a slow shipping schedule which would take until mid-June to accomplish, if all went well, gave Wavell time and risked no more than he could afford to lose of the little he had anyway. If this were not all a deception, why was a force of 120,000-200,000 men considered, when less than 60,000 were actually sent? The answer at first is because that was the ultimate size of the intended force. But the real answer is that Wavell, who was familiar with Russia from his own visit there, guessed that the Ger-

20. On Wavell see Ronald Liewin, *The Chief* (New York, 1981).

21. The records of these meetings are in the 1981 Greek White Paper *Greece 1940-41* (Athens, 1981), Documents 77-82 (French translation kindly supplied by Major-General Konstantinos Kanakaris).

mans had bigger things in mind than Greece, which they would polish off quickly no matter what the British army did. As Wavell noted shortly afterwards, his team had done all right against Italians, but they would find the Germans a lot tougher. What ultimately may have thrown his calculations was, not of the Germans in the Balkans, but the aggressive appearance of the German armour under Rommel in the Western Desert, which also surprised Berlin.

### *The Tatoi Conference and Technical Schedules*

Though in December 1940 Hitler had decided upon *Operation Marita* to clear up his southern flank before invading the U.S.S.R., on the whole the Germans appeared, and the Greeks certainly hoped that they were, content to allow a small British air force to operate against the Italians in Albania. But as the Italians proved less and less able to solve their own problems, the Germans opted for turning *Marita* into a full-scale invasion of Greece. Since full diplomatic relations existed between the Greeks and the Germans, the Greek staff in Athens and, thus also, the British were well informed of what was happening, the Greek military attachés in other countries either telephoning or telegraphing important items of interest, whether rumor or fact. British diplomatic staffs and military attachés were still operating in the Balkans until April 1941. But two things caused a misreading of all this vital non-ULTRA intelligence. The first were preconceptions in the eyes of the beholders. The second was the injection into Anglo-Greek relations of the Eden-Dill mission in February 1941, which insisted on making plans without knowledge of the peoples, the topography, the distances, and the technical limitations these imposed. They brought the unrealism prevalent in London to decision-making in Cairo and Athens.

This situation came about because after he accepted the premiership, Alexandre Koryzis was pressed by the British Ambassador, the pro-Greek Sir Michael Palairet, to affirm or deny the Metaxas response of 18 January 1941. In that Metaxas had taken the position that he could use British air support and weapons, but that he could not accept inadequate British forces for fear of provoking the Germans, and by inadequate, he meant fewer than could hold the northern frontier, probably 3 Greek and 9 British divisions<sup>22</sup>. Not knowing anything of

22. The figure of 9 divisions was mentioned in discussions on 15 January.

the 18 January memorandum, Koryzis suggested that it needed to be studied and asked, quite properly, what the British could do to implement it. Palaret incorrectly reported this to London as a request for aid. At No. 10 Downing Street the ever-itchy Churchill took this as a golden opportunity to get British forces back into action on the mainland of Europe and shortly despatched the Foreign Secretary, his «heir» Anthony Eden, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir John Dill, with *carte blanche* to make arrangements, but with in their sealed orders an admonition to use their judgment. The Cabinet was not told of their mission until they reached Cairo very late on 19 February<sup>23</sup>. The normal decision-making process was now to be disrupted in three important ways: Eden had pro-consular powers as the man on the spot, the two Chiefs of Staff remaining in London bowed to the judgment of their colleague in Cairo, and Eden failed to refer proposed arrangements back to London for final approval, even though the Dominions were involved and the Australian prime minister, Menzies, was in fact in London himself. The result was that when this was coupled with the peacetime amateurism of the British forces of the day, notably of the Army, and with the abysmal shortage of trained staff, critical decisions were made without the proper administrative foundations or assessments.

All of this has to be coupled with one of the enigmatic puzzles of World War II — why did Wavell decide to send forces — to Greece, a change of mind which he had apparently made between 18 January and 19 February? As near as can be determined now he had decided to go to Greece by the end of the first week in February. His resources had not changed appreciably since mid-January when he had offered Metaxas essentially two regiments of artillery. His divisions were worn out from campaigning and needed resting and refitting. But he was a master of deception. And one person he occasionally had to deceive, as before his 9 December 1940 offensive, was a sometime lieutenant of Hussars, Winston Churchill. No one apparently knows how much ULTRA Wavell was getting at this time and certainly no one can say

See note 20. The War Office in London thought 19 would be needed. Major-General Sir John Kennedy, *The Business of War* (London, 1957), 69, says 20 divisions was the estimate on 9 December 1940.

23. Various accounts of the journey out are to be found in Eden's memoirs, *The Reckoning* (London, 1965), in Churchill, *The Grand Alliance* (Boston, 1950), and in Brigadier Mallaby's official account in WO 106/2145/6 and in Pierson Dixon's in FO 371/33145.

how he utilised it<sup>24</sup>. But what can be suggested is that this quiet, silent, one-eyed man assessed the German threat to Greece as real and swift. He assumed that Dill, sensible soldier that he was, would be opposed and opt anyway for aid to Turkey. But he did his sums and decided that the way to get London off his back was to agree to go to Greece, assuming that shipping delays would so hamper his movements that only a very small force would be in Hellas and need to be evacuated when the Germans attacked successfully as soon as the snows melted in the Bulgarian passes. Cairo was a hotbed of spies and so his cover plan was the story we have been told and the deception he maintained till his death. And since he wrote his still-secret memoirs in 1948, 26 years before the ULTRA secret came out, we may never know the whole truth<sup>25</sup>.

Just as one example of why the above may not be an irrational figment of the imagination. Wavell claimed to have lost 8,000 vehicles in Greece, but if every British division sent had taken its full complement of 1400, only 4900 would have been landed with the 58,000 men who actually got there before the evacuation started. And that is assuming that every unit was up to full establishment, which they were not. Nor were thousands of vehicles sent to the Greeks. The Military Mission's total tally of those turned over was only 861. And most of the time the Canal was blocked and the motor-vehicle ships south of it at Suez<sup>26</sup>.

What is known is that early in February Wavell decorated his office with maps of Greece and that by the time Eden and Dill arrived, he was prepared to shift from the Western Desert to Greece, helped by his doubts that his worn troops and their flogged equipment could reach Tripoli. So on 22 February the British party flew to Athens, landed secretly at Menidi airfield and drove to the nearby neo-Gothic

24. Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, I, 10, 349, 353-354, 389-396, 408.

25. In the foreword to John Connell, *Wavell*, I (London, 1964), 11, it states that the work is based upon Wavell's own memoirs in manuscript. Recent correspondence with the family contained denials that it existed, though apparently an American doctoral candidate, Robert Charles Ovelmen, got access to it in 1978 for his dissertation, «The British Decision to Send Troops to Greece, January-April 1941» (Ann Arbor, MI, 1979).

26. On the blocking of the Canal see I.S.O. Playfair, et al, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, I (London, 1954); C.B.A. Behrens, *Merchant Shipping and the Demands of War* (London, 1955), and D.A. Farnie, *East and West of Suez* (London, 1969). For the Report of the Military Mission, see WO 201/119.

Tatoi Palace for a secret conference. On the way over Brigadier Malla-bey of Dill's staff took a list of what could be offered the Greeks and, according to Major de Guingand, later Field Marshal Montgomery's Chief of Staff, multiplied it out of recognition into a mythical box of gifts<sup>27</sup>. Why? And by whose orders? Another peculiar incident of the trip over was a stop at Benghazi to see General Maitland «Jumbo» Wilson, just recently moved from commander of British troops in Egypt to Governor of Cyrenaica, then becoming in Wavell's view a garrison job. Wilson shared a house with Sir Archibald and Lady Wavell in Cairo, but he was not a field commander. In fact, he was a nuisance to Sir Richard O'Connor, whom Wavell had had to protect from interference during his brilliant campaign since 9 December. Why, then, had the Tatoi party stopped so that Wavell could tell Wilson that they were going to send a force to Greece and that he, Wilson, was, if the Greeks accepted it, to command it? Was it because Wavell knew it was going to be a lost cause and that, therefore, he needed to put in command someone visibly impressive whose reputation could not be harmed?

At any rate, at the Tatoi conference the discussion hinged about what the British had to offer<sup>28</sup>. The results were distorted by a master-client relationship, reinforced by the preponderance of high-ranking British officialdom present versus the three Greek leaders—Prime Minister Koryzis, General Alexandros Papagos, the Commander-in-Chief, and King George II. Eden and Dill pressed help which was inadequate without knowing the ground. Papagos looked the gift horse in the mouth fully aware that endless years of meetings with the proposed allies, the Yugoslavs and the Turks, had yielded few results and were likely to bring fewer. The British proposed a Balkan bloc, which on paper looked like a good idea—a revival of the French Little Entente, but which made little sense in 1941 with German armies spread down the Danube in a position to strike across that river at Belgrade on the western bank and thus divide Yugoslavia in two physically, if its own internal problems did not shatter it, and with Bulgaria an ever-ready agent for the take-over of Macedonia and the seizure of Salonika,

27. Major-General Sir Frederick de Guingand, *Operation Victory* (London, 1947, 1960), 50.

28. In addition to the sources in note 23, see also the official *Greece 1940-41* (Athens, 1981), Documents 122-124, which include the «Greek shopping list». For a translation of the Greek sections of these documents I am most heavily indebted to Major-General Konstantinos Kanakaris of the Hellenic Army Directorate of History.

a threat to both Yugoslavia and Greece, and an ancient enemy of Turkey. While the Germans could not do much until the winter weather broke, for even flying was not very practical over the Balkans in winter in those days, none of the Balkan states trusted each other and no hegemony was likely to result, a fact that the British should have known. Moreover, they had nothing to promise even countries such as Yugoslavia which had bought the latest British weapons, such as Hurricane fighters, pre-war<sup>29</sup>. England could not even supply its forces in the Middle East, a fact which the Turks had established for themselves by a visit to Cairo in October 1940.

On a much more practical level, the British were not in a position to discuss sending troops to Greece from first-hand knowledge for only Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, the AOC-in-C ME, had actually viewed the country, and he had not been north of the Plains of Thessaly upon which the major base of Larissa was located. Yet much of the military argument hinged upon whether or not the British had the forces to send, what they had to send, and where it should be located in conjunction with what few Greek forces might be available. Except on the medical side there is no positive evidence of carry-over from World War I around Salonika.

The furthest forward of these lines was the frontier combined with the Metaxas Line of prepared fortifications, against Bulgaria alone, and turnable if the enemy came through Yugoslavia. Then there were the two shorter lines still covering Salonika along the rivers Nestos and Struma (Strymon) and the Rupel Pass, but their weakness was that they lay in flat country behind fordable rivers. And while the frontier line needed a force of up to 19 divisions, the Nestos-Struma system needed at least 12<sup>30</sup>. In both cases there was a very real question as to how much time would be available. Metaxas had said that the British could land as soon as the Germans crossed the Danube into Bulgaria, but they were now already ensconced there. And because of Metaxas's fears of arousing the Germans, the British had made no reconnaissances of the few ports in the area. Nor did they at this period of the war have landing craft, so any debarkation would be a tedious affair highly susceptible to disruption by air attack since few AA guns were avail-

29. Francis K. Mason, *Hawker Aircraft* (London, 1961).

30. The question of the number of divisions needed was the subject of discussion on several occasions, notably at the Tatoi Conference on 23 February and in Athens in early March. WO 106/2145.



able and no airfields. Moreover at the time, only one aircraft carrier *Formidable*, was assigned to the Mediterranean Fleet (after *Illustrious* was damaged at Malta on 9-23 January 1941) and she was stuck until 10 March on the south side of the Suez Canal due to German aerial minelaying.

Looking at the map of northern Greece, then, as it was laid out on the polished dining table at the Tatoi, Papagos pointed out the only possible place for a defensive stand along the Vardar or Axios River — the Aliakmon Line. But this was not a line at all. It started at the eastern end as a river emptying into the Gulf of Therma below Salonika, but it soon shifted to two mountain ranges, the passes through which were the strong points. But again its weakness lay in that its exposed western end or flank lay on relatively flat ground which could be turned by a thrust down from the Monastir Gap in Yugoslavia, which in its turn was accessible from Bulgaria. At best it might have been called the Aliakmon Outposts or Passes for, as the Germans were to show, it was not impregnable and mountain troops could work in between its strongpoints. A further problem with this line was that the British and Greeks looked at the map with different eyes. Dill the Staff College man saw it in British motorized terms with dimensions in feet, names in Greek, and few roads to manage or defend, while Papagos the C-in-C looked at it in Greek infantry terms of metres, of mule-track mountains in which the Greek infantry excelled in defense, and the possibilities of infiltration and lateral movement; it could be thinly held.

The major difficulties with the Aliakmon Line were that Salonika was forward of it, so were the whole of Macedonia and Western Thrace with their large Greek populations, and also in front of the whole position was the vital Athens-Florina railway line upon which the army on the Albanian front depended for its supplies. The narrow-gauge line Volos - Pharsala - Trikkala - north had never been completed though the roadbed had been laid, but not the rails before the Germans attacked on 6 April 1941<sup>31</sup>.

For the British the difficulties of the Aliakmon lay in getting their troops to Greece, forward to the Line, and dug in in time, as well as in getting airfields prepared and in finding the troops.

For the Greeks the Aliakmon Line presented two practical diffi-

31. Great care must be taken in using the maps in the official histories as the railway lines are not always marked correctly.

culties — where would they get the troops to help man it (as only weak recently called-up battalions remained) and, if these were to be withdrawn from Macedonia and Western Thrace, would there be time to do that so that they would not be caught on the flats by German armour and would the population permit it? For both the British and the Greeks there were also the technical problems that hindered their activities. The only viable port was the Piraeus which was served by a standard gauge railway line, but it was so short of coal that in March 1941 the number of 25-waggon trains available had to be limited to 2 for the British until the 10th when they were increased to 3. On the Volos-Larissa Line the locomotives were burning olive wood in place of coal, which meant that they could only haul trains of 40 percent of the normal tonnage, thus severely restricting the use of that largely undeveloped port. At Larissa there were not enough sidings and no freight or goods sheds, so supplies had to be dumped alongside the track until lorries could haul them away. From Larissa to the Aliakmon Line was roughly 200 kilometers over switchback mountain roads, most of which were unpaved, icy metalled nightmares, the only main road being from Athens through Larissa and then north about 9,700-foot high Mount Olympus to Katerini and on to Salonika. When troops did land at Athens, they were sent north by train to Katerini and then marched into position. But there were delays because the passes north of Athens, notably the Brallos, were snow-filled for days on end in March so that convoys could not get through, and when they did the road was so bad that the AA guns being towed were damaged<sup>32</sup>.

The outcome of the Tatoi Conference was that it was decided that the Aliakmon positions could be manned with 3 weak Greek Divisions and 3.5 British. The former would need 20 days to get into position after the attitude of Yugoslavia was ascertained, while the latter would require three months, if the Suez Canal remained open all the time. This latter was critical since 53 ships had to be used and losses would have to be made good from incoming convoys from Britain completing the 12,000-mile voyage around the Cape of Good Hope. But the Germans had already closed the Canal by mining on 17 January. So if the Canal was not open, the movement of Lustre Force from Egypt to Greece, as the expedition was misnamed, would take six months. That would very definitely mean that the British Army

32. There are many details in the Engineer and other files contained in WO 201/68, 201/65, 201/73, 201/53, and in the lessons of the campaign in WO 201/126.

would be campaigning in Greece in the midst of the very malarial and blackwater fever season which his medical officers had warned Wavell needed to be avoided at all costs<sup>33</sup>. Taking the shipping schedule and the medical alarms into account, it is tempting again to infer that Wavell in saying he was going was deceiving London — in the best interests of British grand strategy in the Middle East.

After the Tatoi Conference broke up, Papagos ordered preliminary work on the Aliakmon positions, but moved no troops. Eden and Dill and their party returned to Cairo. De Guingand went to survey the Aliakmon and discovered that unlike Salisbury Plain it was a vast mountainous area for which the British simply did not have the troops or the guns at all, and, after being caught in the Larissa earthquake, so informed Athens and Cairo. Is it possible that his report simply added to Wavell's one-eyed inscrutable smile behind which was a mind which thought that Dill and company would wake up to the facts? The Germans were expected to attack in about two weeks with three to five divisions, but the British did not expect to be dug in for three to six months. As the German invasion schedule had been obtained from Sofia on 1 February with its goal of reaching Athens and taking all of Greece by late April or mid-May, and given the Wehrmacht's successes in 1939 and 1940, Wavell had good reason to think as suggested<sup>34</sup>.

Shortly after they returned to Cairo, Eden and Dill visited Ankara, where they made no progress with persuading the Turks to take an active part in the war. And while in Ankara Eden also heard from the Yugoslav ambassador that the result of his personal appeal from Athens to Prince Paul of Yugoslavia was also negative. However, no one passed that word to Athens. So when on 2 March Eden's party returned to the Greek capital, they were stunned to discover that Papagos had not moved his three divisions onto the Aliakmon, while he protested his innocence because he had been told nothing of the Yugoslav reply<sup>35</sup>. At any rate, panic ensued because the Germans were scheduled to attack on the 12th and Papagos did not now have

33. For the medical officers' opinions see Crew, *Army Medical Services*, I.

34. British sources, both FO and WO, make it plain that ULTRA was not needed — Athens and Cairo were well-informed if they chose to see what was told them. The German schedule came from Sofia through normal diplomatic channels.

35. This was bad staff work on Eden's part. The message from the Yugoslav ambassador was crucial as the Tatoi message to Belgrade had gone through British channels and Papagos had only agreed to prepare to move.

20 days in which to switch his troops. And to move an experienced division from the Albanian front required 30 days, by sea. At any rate, after much discussion in which the British blamed the Greeks for their own careless staff work, the Dill-Papagos Agreement was worked out and signed. This provided for three very weak, scratch Greek divisions to be joined on the Aliakmon position by 3.5 British divisions, mostly composed of Australian, New Zealand and Polish troops, supported by a weak air force. This was far from the 8 to 10 British divisions that Papagos had asked for or the 200,000 troops which Metaxas had called for.

But the 58,000 sent were probably the maximum which the Middle East might have been able to support. In January when Churchill had mentally created the 4-division Middle East Reserve in the Nile Delta, it had been noted that if that force had been sent to Greece, it would in one month have sucked dry the ammunition reserves in the theater<sup>36</sup>. When in June 1979 Major-General Konstantinos Kanakaris of the Greek Army Military History Directorate and I visited the Aliakmon Line we noted that its defence depended upon firepower. And firepower in a defensive struggle is highly consumptive of supplies. If Wavell was concerned about this, it has not been recorded, or at least discovered. But it is equally likely that since he was told early in March that the Germans would have 3 to 3.5 divisions on the Veria Line, that is at one of the passes in the Aliakmon, by 22 March, when he only expected to have a brigade ashore, there was nothing he needed to worry about — his deception plan was working as expected and his Dunkirk would occur shortly.

As soon as London heard of the Dill-Papagos Agreement the Cabinet was furious, but delighted that they could make Eden the scapegoat because he had failed to refer a diplomatic document back to them before concluding it. Churchill was at this point still for trying to back out<sup>37</sup>. He was, through ULTRA and other sources, much more aware of the dangers and his political instincts were working in the right manner when he sensed that a decision had been made on facts totally unlike those which had been presented when the approval had been made in principle, since neither Yugoslavia nor Turkey would budge to create a bloc and aid themselves. Neither, of course, could

36. Kennedy, *The Business of War*, 82.

37. CAB 65/22; see also Sir Alexander Cadogan, *Diaries, 1938-1945* (New York, 1971), 362.

afford to do so. But neither Churchill nor the Cabinet were willing to be blunt, even though Menzies in London and the Australian and New Zealand Governments strongly suggested it, and so Eden and those in Cairo went on thinking that they had probably done the right thing.

At any rate, before the decisions were taken at the Tatoi and in Athens, the wheels were already in motion to send an expeditionary force from Egypt to Greece. It might have been part of a deception intended to keep the enemy off-balance while Wavell replenished the Western Desert forces for the final push they so much wanted to make on to Tripoli. But there was interference both from London and from Berlin. Churchill, who kept switching priorities, ordered Greece to become the first priority, thus depriving the dutiful Wavell of his grand strategic initiative, and Fliegerkorps X and Rommel showed up in the central Mediterranean. (Here ULTRA may have deceived Wavell; we do not know. Berlin, at least, thought Rommel was to lie low). So Wilson was sent to Greece barely disguised as «Mr. Watt» and sequestered in the British Embassy, the old Venizelos House on Loukia-nou Street in Athens, from which he was not allowed to emerge until a few days before the campaign began, though his staff had taken over the Hotel Acropole. Lieutenant-General Philip Neame, an Engineer friend of O'Connor's, was made Governor of Cyrenaica.

In the meantime the goings on in the Western Desert had affected Athens in another way. Almost from the first arrival of the British there in November 1940 there had been signals problems. The RAF signals set-up was professional and the Military Mission adopted it. But at the Cairo end Wavell was 3000 signallers short and those he did have had often been hastily trained and were not up to standard, with the result that they could not take messages at the speed at which the RAF transmitted. Moreover, this meant that the amount of traffic sent and received had to be cut back, which made it easier for the enemy to detect changes. Normal practice at that time was to limit traffic to 8000 four-letter groups per day of which, at this period, about 3000 were dummy messages used as fillers. As the British rolled west in the Desert they began to need more channels for the larger number of messages over longer distances. So certain channels which had originally been assigned to Athens were taken away and reallocated. This put a strain on communications to and from Greece, since the mails took about ten days even by air, for the channels left open could not be worked from midnight to six a.m. as the Hemisphere Layer shifted

and the signals would not bounce off the layer so they could be received at the other end. Thus there was a dead time daily when no messages could be sent or received. After the brief campaign in Greece, Wilson wrote a blistering report on his troubles which included a short dissertation on wireless sets. The British W/T sets of the day would not work in the mountains and most of them would not stand up to being driven around in trucks. After less than ten days of campaigning, only the special sets belonging to Major Reid's GHQ Liaison Regiment worked and even for these to be used the vehicle had to be stopped and two small masts erected or at least handheld. As Wilson noted, in the fast-moving defensive battle that developed, it took his liaison officers up to 24 hours to go from their posts to his headquarters and back again, by which time the situation was different and the posts were somewhere else<sup>38</sup>.

One last curious feature of the Greek affair must be mentioned. After the survivors got back to Cairo, post-mortems were held by the various branches and these were then assembled into a critical report on the lessons to be learnt from the Greek campaign. By then, of course, Wavell had been forced into the abortive June battle in the Desert against Rommel after a long retreat from the borders of Tripoltania, had lost Churchill's confidence, and been moved to India. For over a year, partly because he was involved in other problems in the Far East, he refused to let the report go forward. Was it because it came to the wrong conclusions, or because he could not tell the whole story? Nor could he when his *London Gazette* dispatch appeared in 1946 nor yet when he wrote his autobiography in 1948. For all the family denies it exists, in spite of John Connell's stating the autobiography was the basis for his first volume, could it be that hidden there is the key to the modern one-eyed Sphinx, sometime Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, and his grand strategy? Wavell was too astute and had been too long in the area not to have had one, no matter how myopic London was. And deception, surprise, and a sense of humour were often a part of his plans.

### *Conclusions*

Two clear lessons and one intriguing speculation thus emerge from

38. For Wilson's report see WO 201/95; on the Recce Regiment, which could signal the UK directly though it suspected the security of its cyphers, see Reid, *Last on the List*.

the story of the British decision to aid Greece in 1940-1941. The lessons are that the root cause of the loss was not lack of airpower, but that technically, tactically and mentally the British were simply not equipped for the task. Second, their decision-making process, as I have detailed in my forthcoming book, was faulty, but not for lack of ULTRA. Lastly, and by far the most intriguing, is the question as to why did Wavell go to Greece — who was he out to deceive? And was he successful in pulling off a grand-strategic deception? And to these might be added the failure of the British Higher Direction to have a grand strategy for the Middle East — Eastern Mediterranean theater. If there had been one in February 1941 to guide Eden, it might have had the following priorities governed by the means available:

1. Secure Egypt and the Suez Canal
2. Finish the campaign in East Africa
3. Drive on to Tripoli
4. Secure Crete
5. Take the Dodecanese (*Operation Mandible*)
6. Aid to Greece.

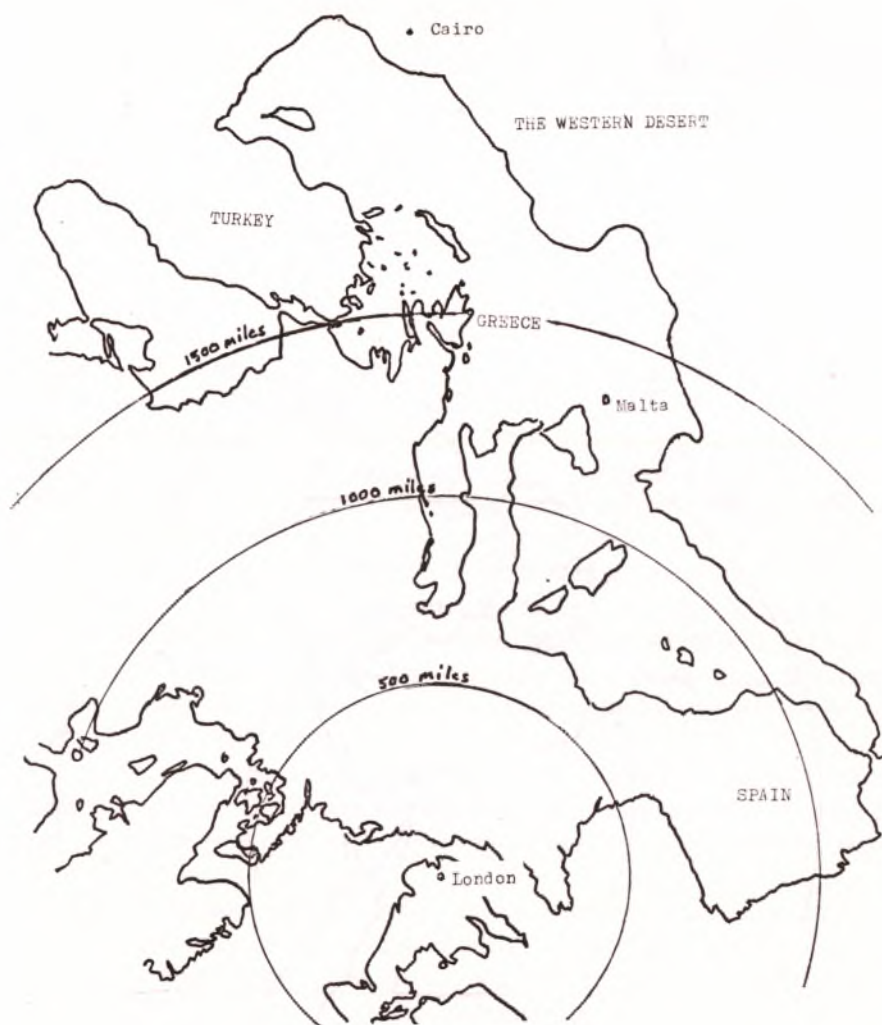
Anyone but King George II, Generals Metaxas and Papagos might ask why put aid to Greece at the bottom of the list. The answer again lies in technical realities. As noted above, the British were not in a position to provide the forces the Greeks needed for an effective resistance against the Italians and the Germans. Moreover, by early February 1941 the Greek army was down to a 60-day stock of ammunition with little hope of replenishment. So its end as a fighting force was not far off because the British were not in the position to re-equip it, though this was discussed. The British could have done much more for the Greek cause by securing Crete which the Germans could not have taken against determined and properly organized opposition. And Crete would have provided an outflanking base from which to provide air cover for the attack on the Dodecanese, which had to be cleared in order to safeguard both the Suez Canal and the Middle Eastern oilfields. Discretion is the better part of valour, while emotion is a poor tool in military planning. By putting the moral myth of classical Greece before the realities of modern blitzkrieg war, the British cost themselves victory in North Africa in the first half of 1941 and left the Dodecanese a thorn in their side until the war ended in 1945. Not long after the defeat in Greece the British action there was also defended

as having delayed the German invasion of the U.S.S.R. There is no evidence from any time before 26 April 1941 that this was the intention.

Early in war as in life, it is important to learn to walk before trying to run, and vital to look as carefully at friends as at enemies before taking action. To do this soundly requires gathering, sifting and evaluating both enemy intelligence and allied capabilities.

*Kansas State University*





*Map I. The view from London.*



Map II. The view from Cairo.