

Chapter 3: The Road To Disaster

F.M. Montgomery said to me "We went into Italy without a plan". And three-and-a-half years earlier we went to Greece without a plan. This comment is justified.

Kippenberger¹

An infantry battalion depends heavily for its performance in action, indeed for its whole spirit and character, on how it is led and trained.

Sir David Hay²

Kippenberger sailed for the war with the First Echelon from Lyttelton on 5 January 1940 aboard the *Dunera*. He left with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and as Commanding Officer of 20 Battalion, the initial infantry battalion raised from New Zealand's South Island. The *Dunera* was soon christened the "hell ship" by the troops because of the cramped sleeping arrangements and because "the poor ship looked as if she were going down with every wave during rough weather".³

The First Echelon, which was to become 4 Brigade, consisted of 18, 19, and 20 Battalions and the Machine Gun Battalion, and was the first contingent of the division to leave New Zealand. The 14 893 men of the echelon contained nearly the entire regular force. The infantry units contained 100 regular force officers and 478 other ranks. Territorial officers, among whom Kippenberger was included, numbered 778, with 9586 other ranks.⁴ These numbers were very disappointing for the New Zealand authorities as they had expected many more volunteers. The First Echelon drew heavily on the experience of those officers and NCOs who had served in the Great War: "without them there would have

¹ Kippenberger, comments on Australian Narrative of Campaign in Greece 19/86/1, AWM 67 Records of Gavin Long, File 2/203 AWM.

² D. Hay, *Nothing Over Us*, Canberra, 1984, p.x.

³ Captain D. W. Hodge 19 Battalion, Private Diaries Greece and Crete, WA II 2/87 Micro 3836 NZNA.

⁴ W. G. McClymont, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War. To Greece*, Wellington, 1957, p.2.

been no Territorial Force; without the Territorial Force it would have been impossible to organise the Expeditionary Force in any reasonable length of time".⁵

A battalion, roughly about 800 men, was the standard fighting unit of the infantry in the Second World War. Modified during the inter-war years, the new structure of an infantry battalion had been tested by the British Army in France in 1940 and "not much had been found wanting".⁶ The basic battalion structure is still retained by most British-style armies today. Henry (Jo) Gullett has written of the structure and purpose of an infantry battalion:

Apart from commandos and other specialized forces usually raised for a particular purpose, a battalion is the smallest fighting unit which may be said to be self-contained. It can feed itself, care for its sick and wounded. It has medicos, cooks, grocers, storemen, policemen, engineers and clerks, who record all things great and small. ... It has wheels to move with, eyes and ears to see and hear with, a network to speak with and mortars to roar with. But all these amenities and services are there for one purpose, to aid, succour and support the fists the battalion fights with. These are its four rifle companies. A rifle company usually fights at a strength of about a hundred all ranks — ten or fifteen at company headquarters to command and service the company, and about thirty in each of the three platoons.⁷

An infantry battalion's job is two-fold. It has to be able to advance across any type of terrain and seize and hold ground of tactical importance. It must also be able to close with, fight and defeat enemy units of similar or smaller dimensions. It must be able to do these tasks in all types of terrain and weather.

To be able to do these things, the battalion needs to be highly trained, well-equipped, with good leadership skills shown at all levels. For this to happen the role of the Battalion Commander, the CO, is paramount. The CO's role in the performance and ethos of his battalion is crucial. He must train and discipline his men and execute the tactics in battle. He influences the style of the battalion more than any other person. This role was allocated to Kippenberger in 1939 and

⁵ *ibid.*, p.4.

⁶ W. Crooks, *The Footsoldiers. The Story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F.*, Sydney, 1971, p.39.

⁷ H. Gullett, *Not As a Duty Only. An Infantryman's War*, Melbourne, 1976, p.2.



Lieutenant Colonel Howard Kippenberger, with his father, about to depart for another war.
(Margaret Denham)

it was now his responsibility to shape and train his battalion ready for war . It was an awesome responsibility as the lives of nearly 1000 people rested on how well Kippenberger performed the task.

20 Battalion, like all the units of the division, had to be built up from scratch yet Kippenberger was optimistic from the beginning. On witnessing the ORs marching into camp for their first introduction to military life, Kippenberger was not deterred by their scruffy appearance nor by their drunkenness but announced to a junior officer, "This is going to be the best infantry in the world".⁸ Only the most optimistic of commanders or a commander determined to produce the best could have made such "a bold prophesy"⁹ from the scanty evidence then before him.

Recruit training was hurriedly completed and Kippenberger's guiding intention became "to foster the independence and initiative of the companies and then weld them into a team"¹⁰ The battalion trained hard in the placid New Zealand countryside before sailing for war and the training was especially notable for the lack of modern equipment available in New Zealand. Well aware from his own experiences of the dreadful reality of war, Kippenberger warned his officers on board the *Dunera* that they must expect to experience military disasters.¹¹ It was to be a most prescient warning. He also stressed to all the "value of discipline and the necessity for co-operation between officers and men".¹²

The battalion arrived at Egypt on 12 February 1940, a destination supposedly temporary for 2 NZEF . Much time was then spent on desert training with Kippenberger preparing a weekly syllabus for Brigade approval. From the beginning Kippenberger insisted on maintaining high standards in the battalion. Jim Burrows, an original 20 Battalion company commander, recalled in 1957:

H.K.K. always insisted that men shaved, because he knew that a man who had a shave would clean his teeth, wash, clean his boots and rifle, and that

⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.3.

⁹ D.J.C. Pringle and W.A. Glue, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment* Wellington, 1957, p.1.

¹⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.4.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.8.

¹² Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.13.

he would feel better and superior to men from other units who were not shaved and spruced up. This was the foundation of his discipline.¹³

In March 1940 the first complete Brigade exercise commenced with a twenty-mile route march across the desert. The exercise consisted of four solid days of desert manoeuvres and culminated in a night attack.

Very early on Kippenberger demonstrated his great concern for the men's welfare:

Just this minute saw a man doing pack drill — time 1145 and blazing hot. Sent for the company commander and blew him up. Man now disappeared and will resume at eventide. Also while I have been writing a junior officer has been in to complain of a senior abusing him in front of his men which was admitted and the senior officer has apologised.¹⁴

In the family atmosphere of the battalion, everything the CO did was widely known and debated. The above two incidents, by no means isolated incidents, would have been warmly applauded by the junior officers and men of the battalion.

April saw the first simulated divisional exercise and more valuable lessons were learned. The climax of this exercise was a dawn attack that proved to be "a fiasco and we were all properly hauled over the coals for it by the General".¹⁵ During this exercise Kippenberger experienced a serious problem that was to plague him and other commanders constantly throughout the North African campaign. This was the great difficulty experienced when map reading in an almost featureless landscape. As Freyberg informed Puttick after the exercise:

Had your order been carried out and the 20th Bn occupied their correct position they would have been on top of Miles's posn on the 10th Evening. It is a case of the Bn Cdr not measuring the length of his advance from the map.¹⁶

¹³ Burrows to Glue, interview, 4 June 1957, Glue Papers.

¹⁴ *Kippenberger — Letters from a Soldier*, T 214, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, recorded 1959.

¹⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.12.

¹⁶ Freyberg to Puttick, letter, 30 April 1940, PERS Puttick, 4/1 NZNA.



The Battalion Commander. A recent arrival to the Middle East.
(Sir John White)



Such a mistake on an exercise was embarrassing; during operations they would have had tragic consequences.

Bill Glue, a 20th Battalion “original” and later one of its Official Historians, recalled these early months of training:

Apart from leave in Cairo and sometimes farther afield in Alexandria and Jerusalem, there was little of interest in the first few months of training. Company parades, battalion parades, and brigade parades for inspection by various British generals and ambassadors; hours spent in infantry training, route marches and one-stop-two rifle drill; cookhouse fatigues, mess orderly duties and sanitary fatigues, all so aptly named.¹⁷

Mid April was the start of summer but the poor Kiwis had already found Spring to be “stiflingly hot”. Summer was a case of “sandstorms by day, hot winds, cold nights and flies”.¹⁸ If the Kiwis had found summer hard for training, it was going to be a good deal worse when it came to fighting in this hostile terrain.

In mid summer 1940 Kippenberger wrote from Maadi Camp in Egypt:

My whole mind and energy are engaged in this task of training the battalion for battle. And when I've seen it in action the first time and behaving itself well I won't care what happens. We are shaping well and I am very confident but one is all the time bracing and hardening, tightening discipline, adjusting personalities, fighting ennui, improving training, trying with every scrap of knowledge and experience I can muster to lift and inspire. It is no strain and I try to keep something in reserve for the day but it is completely absorbing.¹⁹

Well aware of how important were the months spent in training for war, Kippenberger had thrown himself into the task completely and relished doing so.

¹⁷ W.A. Glue, “Wartime Reminiscences”, unpublished recollections, Glue Papers.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *Kippenberger — Letters from a Soldier*, T 214, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, recorded 1959.

June 1940 was an exciting month for Kippenberger's battalion. On 8 June in the early morning the theft of HQ Company's pay roll, some £102, was discovered. A muster parade disclosed a man missing who was later picked up at Port Said by the MPs "in civilian clothes with £52 in possession".²⁰ The culprit was sentenced by court martial to six months' detention.²¹ Then, on 10 June, "to our delight" Italy entered the war and the war moved closer to 2 NZEF.²² On 12 June 20 Battalion left for garrison duty in Cairo. Two days later it experienced what it thought was its first air raid of the war. It was a false alarm, however, as the War Diary recorded on 23 June:

Reports of bombs dropping incorrect. Damage apparently caused by falling AA missiles, firing at unrecognised British plane sent to intercept possible raiders.²³

A first tour of desert duty followed in July and then the battalion dug a "useless anti-tank ditch"²⁴ in the Naghamish Wadi.

In September, after a spell of coast watching at Amiriya, came the painful experience of digging and then training in a brigade box at Baggush, a "laborious task" given "new significance" when Kippenberger explained that they might have to fight in just such a box soon.²⁵ To break the monotony of endless digging Kippenberger sent each of the company for field firing of weapons and celebrated the battalion's first anniversary on 5 October.

In December 1940 2 NZEF learned with "mortification almost as deep as despair" that they would not have an active role in the forthcoming offensive.²⁶ The whole of the New Zealand force was extremely bitter at this exclusion, so much so that Wavell felt it necessary to send a special letter of explanation. Kippenberger did, however, go over the Sidi Barrani battlefields after the fighting and examined them carefully for the tactical lessons they contained. Somehow Kippenberger managed to attach himself to an Australian battalion before the

²⁰ 20 Bn War Diary, 8 May 1940, WA II 1 DA 50/1/6 NZNA.

²¹ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.37.

²² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.12.

²³ 20 Bn War Diary, June 1940, WA II 1 DA 50/1/6 NZNA.

²⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.13.

²⁵ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.28

²⁶ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.14.

attack on Bardia and even carried out a reconnaissance with the CO. He watched the assault on Bardia and his verdict was somewhat parochial: "The Aussies aren't as well disciplined or trained as our people but have a good fighting spirit and did their job all right".²⁷

More intense training saw in the New Year. Then, in early March 1941, 20 Battalion entrained for Greece and Kippenberger, writing to a friend in New Zealand, reflected, "We have not wasted our time. We are ready. My men will do their whole duty".²⁸ Kippenberger later recalled that he had felt "perfectly confident" that the New Zealanders, and his battalion, would perform well:

Standards were high and much was expected of the soldier of the Second World war. They were the standards set on Gallipoli and France and Flanders and Palestine by the first NZEF and they were very high. When we went to Greece for our first campaign those of us who remembered the old Division felt perfectly confident, then we set our own standards, equally high and stern.²⁹

For "Jo" Gullett: "An effective battalion in being, ready to fight, implies a state of mind — I am not sure it is not a state of grace".³⁰ Kippenberger believed 20 Battalion had reached this state and the Greek campaign would test this belief.

Despite creating an efficient battalion Kippenberger had not made great waves at this time nor singled himself out from other battalion commanders; quite the reverse in fact. One day at Maadi camp Kippenberger passed Freyberg and Puttick. Puttick recalled their conversation:

Puttick: (Pointing to Kippenberger) There's one of your future brigadiers.

Freyberg: No. No personality!

Puttick: Wait and see, Sir.³¹

²⁷ *Kippenberger — Letters from a Soldier*, T 214, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, recorded 1959.

²⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.15.

²⁹ Kippenberger's tribute to the New Zealand soldier, *He's a New Zealander*, D833, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives.

³⁰ Gullett, *op. cit.*, p.1.

³¹ Puttick to Glue, interview, 5 July 1960, Glue Papers.

Kippenberger had yet to make his mark in the division.

For a campaign that has generated so much controversy, there is remarkable agreement amongst historians about why a British Expeditionary Force, consisting mainly of Australians and New Zealanders, was sent to Greece in March 1941. All agree that it was political considerations, not military, that were responsible for the decision. This is highlighted by the "most unusual circumstance" that it was sent without a detailed military appreciation being prepared before departure!³² The two divisions and armoured brigade sent were a token commitment and a gesture not meant to be taken seriously as a military force.

Sailing for Greece on 6 March 1941 Freyberg reflected:

I have been in all Mr Churchill's military ventures —ANTWERP, GALLIPOLI and now this Greek War. The third venture will, I trust, be the one which will redeem all the others.³³

Freyberg was about to be terribly disillusioned.

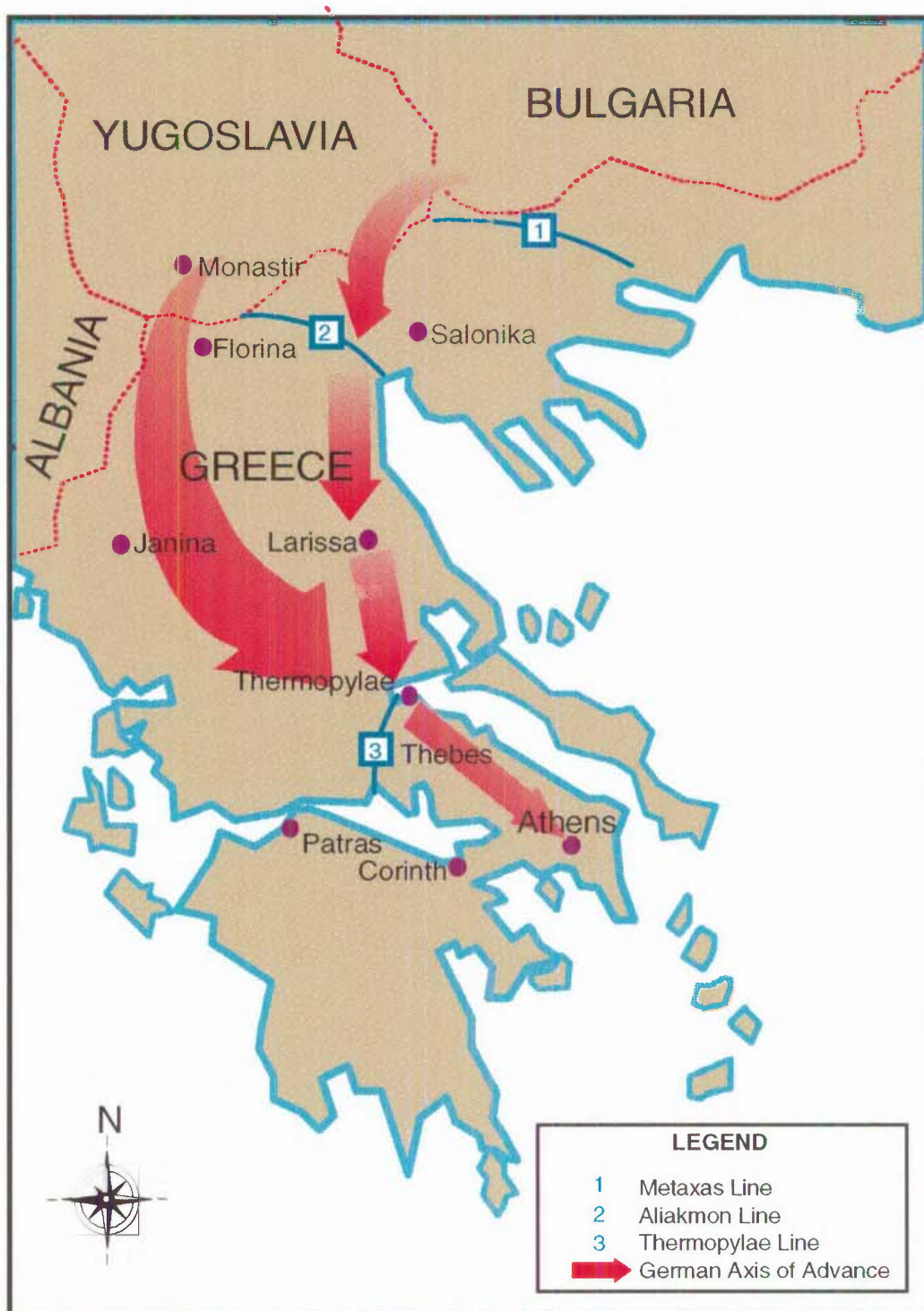
Once the small W Force had landed in Greece the British military authorities "started at once to think of how we should bring them out".³⁴ Initially the Navy planners were not hopeful and believed that they would be lucky to embark more than a third of W Force. By the time W Force was established in Greece both the Greek and Yugoslav armies were on the point of defeat. The campaign rapidly deteriorated into a series of bitter rearguard actions and a fighting withdrawal of over 300 miles along the mountain passes and crowded roads of central Greece. The German superiority in infantry, artillery, armour and above all, airpower — the Allies had 80 planes, mostly obsolete, as opposed to 800 German and 300 Italian planes³⁵ — soon took a heavy toll on W Force. "We saw a

³² McClymont, *op. cit.*, p.112.

³³ Freyberg, *Reflections, Leaving Alexandria 6 March 1941, Greece — Historical Papers, Orders, etc, WA II 8/10 Part II NZNA.*

³⁴ Admiral Cunningham, quoted in McClymont, *op. cit.*, p.119.

³⁵ G. Long, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945. Greece, Crete and Syria*, Canberra, 1953, p.37.



**Allied defensive positions & German axis of advance in Greece
April 1941**

hell of a lot of their air force", recollected one 20 Battalion veteran, "but none of our own".³⁶

For the New Zealand Division the Greek campaign was an especially bitter experience. Most units spent many days preparing fortified positions only to evacuate them without firing a shot. The division was involved in several rearguard actions yet for most the campaign resembled one long withdrawal — the hardest and most tiring of all the phases of war. For some officers and soldiers the campaign had a feeling of unreality. Kippenberger, for example, thought that the whole campaign was a "neat little problem in rearguard tactics. In fact the whole operation in Greece had rather the nature of an exercise".³⁷

Despite the vigorous rearguard actions, W Force never made serious contact with the German forces and there was never any question of trying to halt the rapid German advance into Greece. For the New Zealand Division, Greece, their first campaign of the war, was an unfortunate beginning. It became only the first of many more military disasters.

Kippenberger and 20 Battalion were part of the Second Flight sent to Greece. The first that many knew a move was afoot was when "Lord Haw Haw" broadcast that "General Freyberg's circus is on the move".³⁸ "But where?" noted one 20 Battalion man.³⁹ That mystery was solved when on 12 March on board the *Breconshire* during a CO's inspection Kippenberger read a message from Freyberg which announced Greece as the destination. The message also stated that the New Zealanders had a proud tradition to live up to and that they would be fighting for the cradle of civilisation. The men clapped at the end of the message; "it seemed the right thing to do" recalled Glue.⁴⁰ The *Breconshire* sailed through a huge storm at sea and Kippenberger took some comfort from reading in the Book of Acts about the Apostle Paul's stormy journey on the same waters nearly 2000 years before. Disembarking at Piraeus on 7 March to a huge welcome from the local population, the battalion entrained for the front and detrained at Katerini on 19-20 March.

³⁶ W.A. Glue, interview, Stoke, 19 January 1995.

³⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.26.

³⁸ Glue, "Wartime Reminiscences", *op.cit.*

³⁹ B.C. Borthwick, "It Was All Greek", unpublished article in Borthwick Papers, MS Papers 1459, A7L.

⁴⁰ Glue, "Wartime Reminiscences", *op.cit.*

Kippenberger was allocated a section of the Aliakmon Line to defend — some 6 000 yards of the line about Ryakia — on which W Force prepared to meet the German advance. 20 Battalion was part of 4 Brigade in position on the Aliakmon Line along with 6 Brigade. 5 Brigade, after only just arriving in Egypt, was the last to arrive in Greece and moved into a reserve position at the Olympus Pass. It was the the first time the Division had assembled with its complete infantry complement.

On 5 Brigade's arrival, Kippenberger and Jim Burrows, his 2IC, visited 23 Battalion, the brigade's South Island battalion, and welcomed them to Greece. It was a very thoughtful gesture as 5 Brigade's stay in Britain with the accompanying publicity had generated a considerable amount of hostility and envy from the units of the other two brigades. Brian Bassett, an officer in 23 Battalion, recorded of the visit:

Kip came over with Jim Burrows to welcome us. It was good to see him again — so quiet, efficient and confident, just like our own C.O. I ... relished his imperturbable good humour.⁴¹

Kippenberger's battalion, as did the other battalions of 4 Brigade, prepared their positions thoroughly by digging trenches and weapon pits and by laying mines and wire. Glue recorded after arriving at Ryakia:

Next day it was back to the the pick and shovel. We planned and dug our own section post, camouflaged it with branches to make it look like a round sheep corral, and dug a tank trap in front of our position.⁴²

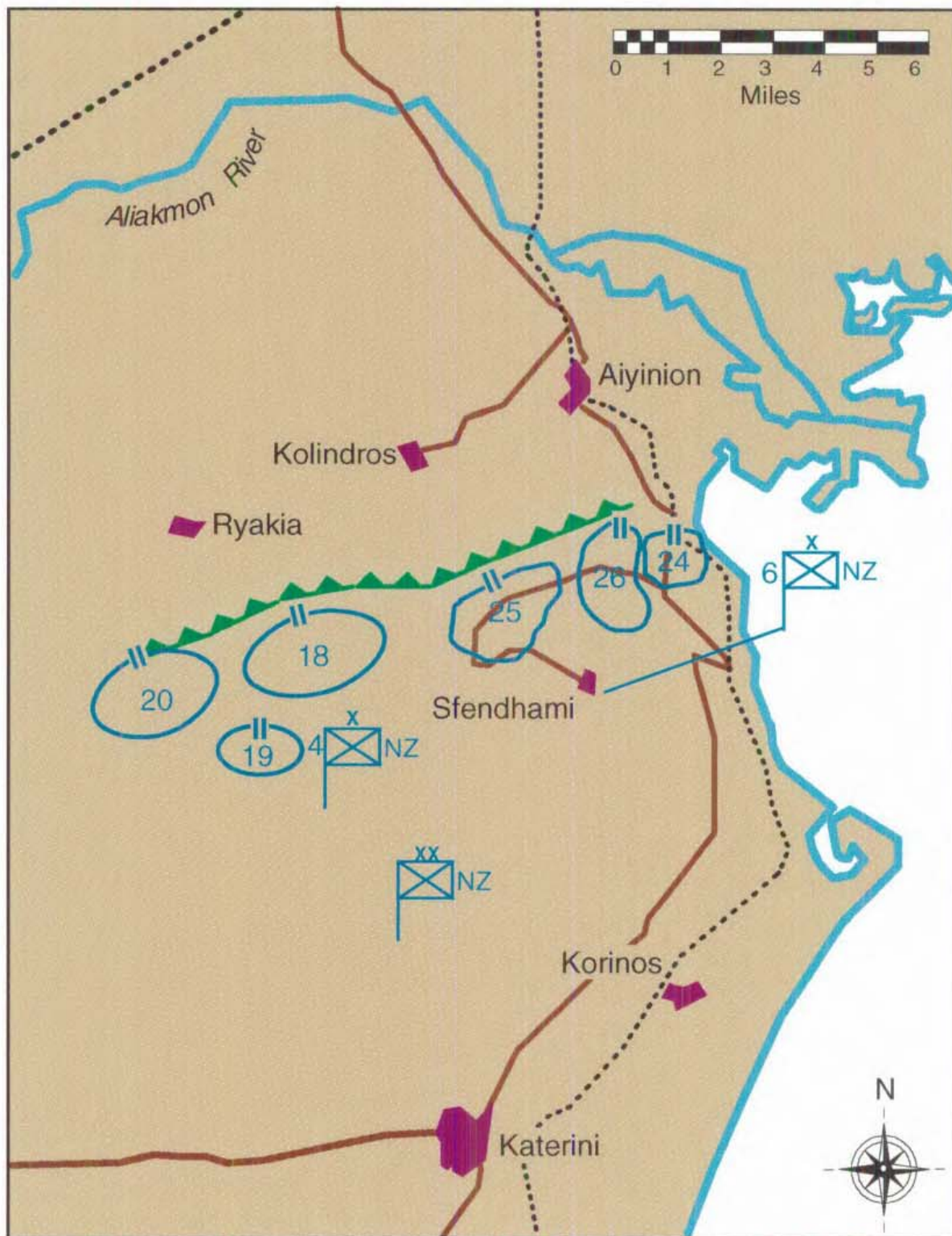
Kippenberger also carried out as many personal reconnaissances of the area as possible. He particularly wanted to “discover a way of retirement over the trackless foothills to the rear should the 20th have to get out”.⁴³ Much energy was expended on positions that would never be defended and would be abandoned without firing a shot.

Both Lieutenant General Thomas Blamey, the ANZAC Corps commander,

⁴¹ A. Ross, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 23 Battalion*, Wellington, 1959, pp.25-6.

⁴² Glue, “Wartime Reminiscences”, *op.cit.*

⁴³ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.47.



The Aliakmon Line

4 & 6 New Zealand Brigades' Positions, 5 April 1941

and Freyberg were unhappy with the New Zealand positions on the Aliakmon Line which had extended out to a front of 28,500 yards, a job for at least two divisions. Freyberg was "filled with misgivings" about the very thin line his division was holding and Kippenberger quickly came to the decision that trying to hold the the Aliakmon Line without enough troops was "a hopeless military plan".⁴⁴ Blamey thought the New Zealanders should be withdrawn to the foothills of Mount Olympus and sent Brigadier Rowell to W Force HQ to press for the New Zealanders' withdrawal. Rowell "was answered with arguments that it would depress the spirits of the New Zealanders if they had to abandon positions on which they had worked so long and that it was desirable to protect the railhead at Katerine".⁴⁵

Freyberg was now beginning to have serious doubts about Churchill's latest military venture. He could now see disaster pending and wrote in his diary:

The situation is a grave one. We shall be fighting against heavy odds in a plan that has been ill conceived and one that violates every principle of military strategy. I have told General Wavell that I had no illusions upon the toughness of our task.⁴⁶

On 6 April 1941 Germany attacked Greece and Yugoslavia driving into Salonika from Bulgaria and advancing south. The following day Kippenberger received word from brigade HQ "not to do any more wiring".⁴⁷ Kippenberger had been expecting his battalion to move forward to meet the enemy forces, but Brigadier Puttick "to my extreme surprise, said we were giving up the Aliakmon position".⁴⁸ Within forty-eight hours of Germany's entry into the war against Greece, the New Zealand Brigades withdrew from their well-prepared positions

⁴⁴ Freyberg, *The NZ Div in Greece*, WA II 8/8; Kippenberger, notes on Preliminaries to Greece Campaign, WA II 11/30 NZNA.

⁴⁵ Ian Wards, quoting a comment made by Gavin Long, note on Narrative Part III, p.129, WA II 3 Acc 2452, 3/49 NZNA.

⁴⁶ Freyberg, *Diary 3 April 1941*, GOC's Diary Part I, WA II 8/43, *New Zealand Division in Greece, Draft Telegram to PM*, WA II 8/10 Part II Greece --- *Historical Papers, Orders etc*, WA II 8/8 NZNA.

⁴⁷ 20 Bn War Diary, 7 April. WA II 1 DA 50/1/16 NZNA.

⁴⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.18.

at Katerini to the Mount Olympus Passes as Blamey had suggested they should do weeks before. Freyberg commented "Thus nearly a month's work and a large proportion of our wire and mines which had been put on the Metaxas Line went by the board".⁴⁹ For some reason Freyberg has referred to the Aliakmon positions as the Metaxas Line which was in fact further north. It had been a totally wasted effort which did depress the New Zealanders.

20 Battalion completed a very difficult night withdrawal that included a ten mile march over very rough tracks, through driving rain and sleet and carrying full field equipment, "a night of unqualified misery" Kippenberger would later recall while Glue confirmed it as the "most miserable night I've ever spent".⁵⁰ The withdrawal was successfully accomplished with the loss of only two men — two brothers who fell asleep during one of the halts and were next heard of in Germany.

The battalion debussed near the village of Lava and moved into reserve behind 18 and 19 Battalions which had taken up positions south of Servia Pass on the high ground. While shaving at Lava, Kippenberger had a very close call. A shell came through the roof of the house Kippenberger was using and he was struck on the face by a large splinter of wood.⁵¹

Brigadier Puttick, the 4 Brigade Commander, had been ordered to hold the Servia position at all costs as his brigade formed the essential pivot through which all the units to the north would have to pass. Meanwhile the rest of the division had been withdrawn to the Mount Olympus area.

On 11 April "war at last reached us and we had our first casualties"⁵² as Kippenberger's battalion and the other New Zealand positions about Servia were heavily strafed by German planes. On 13 April Kippenberger's battalion moved out of its reserve position to extend 19 Battalion's line westward and took up their positions on the steep crest of a hill.

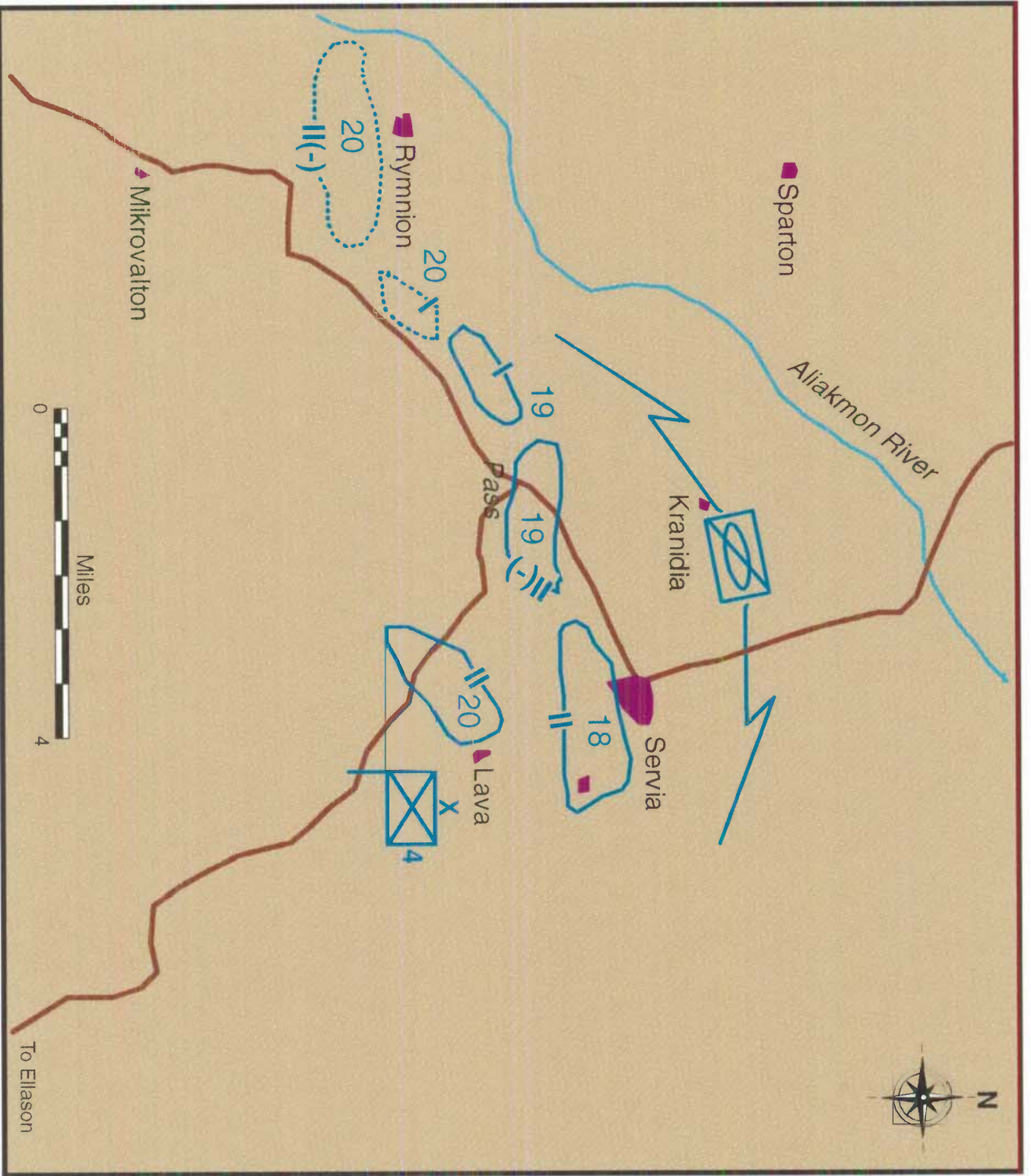
Meanwhile, the German forces were advancing into Greece from two directions and were meeting with very little opposition. In the north they had

⁴⁹ Freyberg, *The New Zealand Division in Greece*, WA II 8/8 NZNA.

⁵⁰ Kippenberger to Colonel Les Hunt, letter, 5 May 1941, 20 NZ Bn Correspondence for Greek Campaign, WA II 1 DA 50/10/48 NZNA; Glue, "Wartime Reminiscences", *op.cit.*.

⁵¹ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.57.

⁵² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.22.



4 New Zealand Infantry Brigade at Servia

Greece, 14-18 April 1941

broken the Metaxas Line and were rushing southward. In the southeast their XXXX Korps had breached the Monastir Gap on 9 April which would enable them to outflank easily the W Force positions on the Aliakmon Line and at the mountain passes. The British military commanders, alarmed at the speed of the developments taking place, began to formulate plans for a general withdrawal on 12 and 13 April. At a meeting between Generals Wilson and Papagos on 16 April, the Greek General, to the immense relief of the British commanders present, suggested that W Force should be withdrawn from Greece. A written order confirming the withdrawal from Greece was hastily drafted in Athens the next day.

On the night of 14-15 April the German forces reached the New Zealand positions about the Olympus Pass and met stern resistance. The main German attack came on the following night and once again the German losses were heavy but late that night 5 Brigade was withdrawn from the pass and the demolitions in the pass blown. The demolitions were not a success, cratering the pass without blocking it. This failure reveals the inexperience of the New Zealanders as the division had had five weeks in the area to prepare demolitions for the vital passes and this failure left the Germans free to harass the hard pressed New Zealanders during their withdrawal from Servia Pass.

The German forces were not expecting heavy opposition about Servia Pass and an air reconnaissance report had stated "there was not a single enemy soldier between the river and the heights southwest of Servia".⁵³ Two German infantry companies expecting to capture the pass without opposition were entirely destroyed by 19 Battalion on 15 April.

On 16 April Kippenberger became very alarmed when he found no units of the Australian 19 Brigade on his left flank and was even more concerned when he could see the brigade and 26 New Zealand Battalion withdrawing far below his position. Kippenberger began to extend his left flank when he was belatedly informed that his own battalion would be withdrawn to its original position astride the road to Lava. The Battalion War Diary recorded:

Word received from Bde to destroy all unnecessary gear. 26 Bn and 19 Aust

⁵³ 9 Panzer Division War Diary, 14 April 1941, quoted in McClymont, *op. cit.*, p.273.

Bde withdrew from our left without telling us. Bn to return Lava.⁵⁴

Another difficult night withdrawal was in store through deep mud and freezing weather, three miles of it by truck, a further twelve by foot. It was "the toughest march I've ever done", recalled Glue, "Frankly I was 'buggered'".⁵⁵

At a brigade conference the next day Kippenberger learned from Brigadier Puttick that all of W Force was to be withdrawn to the Thermopylae region, that 20 Battalion would be the rearguard and that he personally would be in charge of the demolitions in the Servia Pass.

4 Brigade withdrew on the night of 17-18 April, a night of heavy fog that reduced visibility considerably but increased the chances of completing the withdrawal undisturbed — the "Miracle of the Mists".⁵⁶ Kippenberger, in charge of the demolition party and aware that he was making history, "kept careful notes of times of various incidents during the night but regret that these notes were lost when my car was abandoned".⁵⁷ 19 Battalion completed an arduous ten-mile march from the pass to the embussing point and retired in good order to be away from the pass by midnight. 18 Battalion was shelled for most of the withdrawal, had an even more exhausting march to complete so that the battalion became strung out in long columns and progress was extremely slow despite the need for haste. At 0230 hrs, Lieutenant Colonel John Gray, the 18th Battalion Commanding Officer appeared, very exhausted and with the unfortunate information that two of his companies were still behind him and would probably have to be abandoned. Warned to be out of the pass by 0300 hrs, Kippenberger, nevertheless, felt that "two companies were worth waiting for".⁵⁸ By 0540 hrs, the two companies had passed through and Kippenberger ordered the pass blown.

Immediately after the charges were blown, voices were heard calling for assistance. Kippenberger decided to wait for these men even when the Engineer

⁵⁴ 20 Battalion War Diary, 16 April 1941, WA II 1 DA 50/1/16 NZNA.

⁵⁵ Glue, "Wartime Reminiscences", *op.cit.*

⁵⁶ Wards, comment on Draft Narrative, Part IV, p.409, WA II 3 Acc 2452 3/49, NZNA.

⁵⁷ Kippenberger, Report of Operations of Rearguard 4 Inf Bde, 18 April 1941, HQ 4 NZ Inf Brigade War Diary April 1941, Appendix J, WA II 1 DA 46/1/16, Micro Z2798 NZNA.

⁵⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.28.

Officer in charge of the demolitions, Lieutenant Kelsall, "very properly reminded me that I was endangering his sixty men ... but I replied I was resolved to wait".⁵⁹ Kelsall also told Kippenberger that it "was quite likely that demolitions behind us might be blown sooner than expected".⁶⁰ Kippenberger immediately dispatched his Intelligence Officer to have Puttick delay the demolition program.

The stragglers passed through the check points, the demolition party retired to the next demolition point and blew the second set of charges, but once again, "maddeningly there were more cries".⁶¹ Four stragglers turned up and were quickly sent on their way. Another set of charges was blown and a single New Zealand voice could be heard calling from the gloom. Although "Kelsall looked doubtfully at me" Kippenberger recalled, "I was unable to leave" until the last man turned up totally exhausted, a "fully equipped, great-coated private soldier, still carrying his Bren gun and nearly dead on his feet".⁶²

Dawn was rapidly approaching and no time was wasted in blowing the remaining charges but it was after 0800 hrs, over five hours after the time allocated to complete the demolitions, when the demolition party emerged from the pass onto the plain. Kippenberger was later to admit that his waiting for the stragglers was a mistake and wrote in his report after the campaign:

This additional delay was most unfortunate and if I had been aware that there was any danger of our retreat being cut off I think I would have abandoned these stragglers.⁶³

The demolition party reported to Puttick on the plain who congratulated Kippenberger on getting everyone out of the pass.⁶⁴ Kippenberger's group formed a small column with his own car bringing up the rear and "started cheerfully to catch the Brigade, by then some thirty miles ahead ... and thought our worries

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Capt. D.V.C. Kelsall, 6 Field Regiment, Statement, McClymont Papers, WΛ II 3/16b NZNA.

⁶¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.28.

⁶² *ibid.*, p.29.

⁶³ Kippenberger, Report on operations of 4 Infantry Brigade rearguard, 17 & 18 April 1941, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.29.

over”.⁶⁵ The column was strafed repeatedly from the air, shelled by their own side and then ran headlong into a German armoured column of six medium tanks and lorried infantry at the Mount Olympus road junction. Every vehicle in the column stopped except Kelsall's which carried on through to the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry rearguard screen. Kippenberger tried “to put in a counter attack but the fire of my two carriers was obviously ineffective”. There occurred a lull in the firing and Kippenberger could see nothing but abandoned vehicles and dead bodies ahead of him. “I then decided that there was nothing for me to do except to try to escape with my party.”⁶⁶

Kippenberger found himself in command of a small group of six. The group abandoned all heavy equipment and tramped south all day through the hills running west of the road. The going was very tough but Kippenberger, out of necessity, set a very fast pace. Once again they were shelled by their own artillery and by some German tanks but eventually reached the lines of 25 Battalion. Kippenberger was “extremely sorry” that the long delay in blowing the charges resulted “in the practical annihilation of this gallant party” but he had been “completely unaware” of the possibility of being cut off from any other direction.⁶⁷ In the encounter with the enemy forty engineers and six infantry men had been lost. The Germans had arrived “most unexpectedly via the PENEIOS Gorge”.⁶⁸

Kippenberger's group, thoroughly exhausted after its ten-mile detour, was transported through Larissa and a Thessaly plain now bearing the scars of an army in full retreat. Kippenberger was not again to see “such a picture of disaster until the pursuit after Alamein eighteen months later”.⁶⁹ He later commented on this chaotic journey:

This dreadful confusion, which might have been disastrous, was due to the change of orders — and that was due to the failure of Anzac Corps or Div HQ to reconnoitre the route back immediately after hearing or suspecting that retirement was probable or possible, an elementary

⁶⁵ Kippenberger to Colonel Hunt, letter, 5 May 1941, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Kippenberger, Report on Operations of 4 Infantry Brigade rearguard, 17 & 18 April 1941, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ *ibid*

⁶⁸ 4 Brigade War Diary, 17 April 1941, WA II 1 DA 46/1/16 NZNA.

⁶⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.35.

precaution.⁷⁰

Finally, on the morning after the ambush, Kippenberger was able to link up with his own battalion much to the relief of Puttick and his own 2IC and then slept for a solid twelve hours.

The New Zealand Division, with 6 Australian Division on its left, took up position on the Thermopylae Line, a well-known battlefield of Ancient Greece. The Anzac position, between the sea and Thermopylae pass, made a formidable defensive position but once again the position was abandoned without serious contact being made with the advancing enemy.

Kippenberger later recalled how, when rumours were rife about the forthcoming big battle when the two forces would eventually clash head-on, he was told by the senior New Zealand staff officer, "We're hooking it. The Greeks have packed it up and we're off".⁷¹ His battalion was then moved to Thebes and with an Australian Field Regiment of artillery and seven anti-tank guns in support, formed the rearguard position through which most of W Force eventually passed on the way to the evacuation beaches.

The Thebes position was a model defensive position offering perfect observation, concealment and defence in depth. On 26 April the enemy reached the 20 Battalion's position: "an alarming sight, a Juggernaut of mechanised might".⁷² With enemy light tanks, trucks and motorcycles immediately in front of and below them, it was planned to let the advanced guard reach the New Zealand positions before opening fire on the column's front and rear. This plan was ruined when the Australian artillery opened fire before the advanced guard reached the village and, with their guns unregistered for firing, few hits were made. The enemy column then withdrew out of range.

That night the battalion was withdrawn and Kippenberger once again supervised the demolitions. After reaching Athens at dawn and snatching a few hours sleep, Kippenberger was awakened by the commander of the Australian Field Regiment who informed him that a dreadful mistake had occurred as they were meant to have embarked the previous night and "Your battalion and my

⁷⁰ Kippenberger, comment on Campaign Narrative, WA II 3 Acc 2452 3/49 NZNA.

⁷¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.37.

⁷² *ibid.*, p.39.

guns are the last British troops in Greece".⁷³

Kippenberger immediately organised his force into a defensive position determined to fight it out to the last. While conducting a personal reconnaissance to find a better position, Kippenberger stumbled across Brigade HQ with a very indignant Puttick, upset at Kippenberger for believing that he would have left 20 Battalion behind. The whole of 4 Brigade was in fact present, in well concealed positions and was to embark that night.

With nightfall Kippenberger moved his battalion through 19 Battalion's position to the beach at Porto Rafti where they destroyed all their heavy equipment and discarded their packs. Kippenberger's group, the last of 20 Battalion to leave Greece, boarded a tank lighter which struck a sandbar and caused an anxious hour's delay before they were finally freed and transferred to the cruiser *Ajax*. The Battalion War Diary recorded:

Good trip across. Breakfast of boiled eggs, bread, tea and coffee provided by Navy. Very much appreciated.⁷⁴

For Kippenberger and 20 Battalion the Greek campaign was over. The battalion had suffered 149 casualties.

Many mistakes had been made during the Greek campaign and there was considerable soul-searching by British, Australian and New Zealand authorities afterwards. Papagos, the Greek commander, wrote after the war that for Britain not to have sent troops to Greece would have been "a flagrant breach of the promises so repeatedly given" yet he saw the sending of W Force as "a strategic error in contradiction with the principles of a sound conduct of the war".⁷⁵ Lord Alanbrooke, who succeeded Dill as CIGS, thought that the Greek campaign had been "a strategic blunder" and he doubted Dill's "advice and judgment in the matter".⁷⁶ After the war Kippenberger wrote that the Greek campaign, because of lack of numbers, preparation, air cover, faulty equipment, and working with new allies, was "an exceptionally difficult campaign to conduct" and was "just

⁷³ *ibid.*, p.52, 20 Bn War Diary, 27 April 1941, WA II 1 DA 50/1/16 NZNA.

⁷⁴ 20 Bn War Diary, 28 April 1941, WA II 1 DA 50/1/16 NZNA.

⁷⁵ Papagos, quoted in McClymont, *op. cit.*, p.478.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, pp.479-80.

another example, of which our history abounds, of our political policy having no strategical backing". Yet he believed:

That we were right in going to the aid of Greece when we did I do not doubt for one moment. I thought at the time, that, militarily it was a forlorn expedition.⁷⁷

In this belief Kippenberger mirrored Blamey's opinion that the outstanding lesson of Greece was that "no reasons whatever should outweigh military considerations when it is proposed to embark on a campaign, otherwise failure and defeat are courted". To embark on a military venture without clear objectives, without the means to achieve those objectives, and without a plan as had happened in this campaign was a recipe for "inevitable failure".⁷⁸ Blamey's reasoning was sound.

The campaign had been very costly, too, especially for the Australian and New Zealand divisions. Casualty figures vary according to the source but the Official History figures are as accurate as any other.

	Number Sent	Killed	Wounded	POWs
Australian	17 125	320	494	2 030
New Zealand	16 720	291	599	1 614
British	21 880	146	87	6 480 ⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Kippenberger, notes on Preliminaries to Greek Campaign, 7 December 1950, WA II 11/30 NZNA.

⁷⁸ Blamey, GOC/79 7 August 1941, Greece Policy File on Lustre, AWM 3 DRL 6643 [1/2A]7 AWM.

⁷⁹ McClymont, *op. cit.*, p.486.

German losses were stated as 1160 killed, 3755 wounded and 365 missing.⁸⁰ There seems to be a noticeable distortion in the figures in the table in that the country that sent the most troops to Greece had the fewest battle casualties. This probably reflects the type of units Britain sent to Greece and how much fighting these units actually did. As well as the losses of personnel, 8 000 vehicles and 209 aircraft were lost and two destroyers and five transport ships were sunk.⁸¹

With the Greek disaster coinciding with Rommel's first successful advances in Cyrenaica, the British Government asked for a vote of confidence in the House of Commons. The debate was held on 6 and 7 May 1941 and the Government faced many criticisms but won a huge vote of approval by a vote of 447 to 3 against. The House concluded the decision to send W Force "was accepted as natural and honourable".⁸² If only British honour had not been bought so dearly with so much Anzac blood!

As this was Australia and New Zealand's first campaign against German land forces and because it was a defeat it was natural that the soul-searching of three countries involved would focus on the performance of senior commanders and the troops. The New Zealand Division, as a whole, had performed credibly well and General Wilson sent a personal message to his old GOC in New Zealand that the division had:

acquitted itself magnificently carrying out difficult and complicated withdrawal inflicting severe losses on enemy infantry and tanks. Its spirit and fighting qualities are of the highest order and right up to the tradition of the New Zealand Division in which I had the honour of serving on your staff.⁸³

The Australians fared less well in this process. Blamey's performance during the campaign, for example, generated a considerable amount of controversy especially his decisions to obey Wavell's order to depart from Greece leaving the

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p.485.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.483.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Wilson to General Sir Andrew Russell, personal message, Ef 957 13 May 1941, Various Reports Crete, WA II 2/85 Micro 3826 NZNA.

evacuation of Anzac forces to a woefully equipped W Force HQ, and the arranging for his son's passage on the plane carrying him from Greece. Horner has remarked that Wavell's order for the Dominion Generals to leave Greece so early in the evacuation was "a major blunder" and that Freyberg's refusal to go "caused invidious comparisons with Blamey".⁸⁴ Kippenberger always believed that Force and Corps HQ had "got off unnecessarily early".⁸⁵ The performance of the Australian troops also came in for some heavy scrutiny and the Australian fighting reputation, rather unfairly, suffered a severe dent as a result of the Greek campaign largely as a result of the performance of one battalion, 2/8 Battalion, which had allegedly thrown away their weapons and bolted during one of the rearguard actions.

What of Kippenberger's performance in his first campaign of the war? Early in 1940, in response to Freyberg's concerns about the quality of the New Zealand battalion commanders, the NZ CGS had warned Freyberg:

I think the weakness is in the Battalion commanders, but they are the best we have at the present time. I agree with you that there will have to be a bit of a culling-out, and that there will also have to be a cull out of some of your staff.

General Duigan had stated that he was "doubtful about Macky" CO of 21 Battalion, because his constant grumbling was "a bad thing in a CO, as it will permeate through the officers and Other Ranks".⁸⁶ Macky would be "culled" for his performance in Greece and other COs would follow after Crete. But what of Kippenberger?

Although not heavily involved in the action, Kippenberger's first campaign was a reasonable success. Kippenberger had commanded his battalion well and did not lose control of it during the difficult stages of the withdrawal as some of the other battalion commanders had done. Many other New Zealand

⁸⁴ D.M. Horner, *High Command. Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945* Sydney, 1982, p.91.

⁸⁵ Kippenberger to Stewart, letter, 25 February 1954, Glue Papers.

⁸⁶ Lieutenant General Duigan to Freyberg, letter, 24 January 1940, WA II 8/0 NZNA.

COs had performed equally as well though. Kippenberger had also been personally in command of the demolitions of two strategic passes and had carried them out with great coolness, determination and success. Puttick, Kippenberger's immediate senior officer, was very pleased with the performance of 20 Battalion and its CO and was later to state that the battalion did only one foolish thing during the course of the campaign. The foolish incident Puttick was referring to occurred when Kippenberger's battalion was resting on a road after a particularly tiring march. Kippenberger "nearly intervened to order them off the roads; but they were hot and heavy laden and very tired so I let them go." As Kippenberger recounts, "Retribution came very quickly" when a German attack by fighter aircraft caught the battalion in the open and killed two officers and thirty men in the one attack. 20 Battalion had been "sharply punished" for their foolishness.⁸⁷

Despite this one hiccup, Kippenberger stated proudly that the conduct of his battalion "was splendid throughout, discipline was perfect. Morale is wholly unimpaired. ... All officers were good without exception".⁸⁸ If a CO's role in the performance and ethos of his battalion is "crucial" then 20th Battalion's performance in Greece was a reflection on Kippenberger's success at this level of command. One foolish incident in a difficult first campaign, costly though the mistake was and obviously deeply felt by Kippenberger, was still a very credible performance. The Greek campaign revealed that 20 Battalion was well-led and well-trained and had reached "Jo" Gullett's "state of grace". As General von Moltke once stated: "Only when a commander has faced and proven himself in retreat can he be said to have earned one of the essential laurels of greatness as a military commander".⁸⁹ Greece unfortunately was not to be Kippenberger's last retreat of the war.

Although the New Zealand Division fared somewhat better in the post-campaign soul searching than the Australians, its performance was not entirely free from criticism — most of it in connection with 21 Battalion's performance at

⁸⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.43.

⁸⁸ Kippenberger to Colonel Hunt, letter, 5 May 1941, WA II 1 DA 50/10/48 NZNA.

⁸⁹ quoted in N. Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942 -1944*, London, 1985, p.6.

the Pinios Gorge. The Australian commanders were certainly unhappy about the performance of this New Zealand battalion when it had come under Corps command during the action at the Pinios Gorge. The battalion commander was described as being in a "blue funk" and it was felt that the battalion "had tended to panic and had not held on long enough".⁹⁰

During the engagement at Pinios Gorge, the battalion CO Lt. Col. Macky, one of the "four colonels" of 1937, feeling very isolated since his battalion's arrival in Greece and now in a strange ad hoc command, had told his company commanders before contact with the Germans that "if completely cut off and overwhelmed, those left would make out in small parties to Volos".⁹¹ General Stewart believed this order to be "Deplorable — at this stage of the action".⁹² Stewart had always felt that "Polly" Macky had been "badly done by" but after reading a full account of 21 Battalion at Pinios Gorge believed Macky "was lucky to get away with being returned to New Zealand. ... If ever there was a case for hanging on and fighting it out, it was here".⁹³ The 21 Battalion Official History strongly disagreed with this assessment believing that "with inadequate numbers and inferior equipment, it had done everything possible" at the gorge.⁹⁴

After contact with the Germans had barely been established, Macky ordered his battalion to scatter and personally led fifty men away from the position. Freyberg, forward at the key danger spot in the early afternoon, was "greatly troubled" to learn that 21 Battalion had disintegrated. At the Pinios position he found two Australian infantry battalions hard pressed and a detachment of New Zealand artillery giving an excellent account of itself "but no New Zealand infantry were to be found".⁹⁵

The hasty withdrawal of 21 Battalion made the whole Pinios Gorge position untenable and Freyberg ordered the remaining units to withdraw that evening. It was the German advance guard from this breakthrough at Pinios

⁹⁰ Rowell to Long, letter, 20 January 1947, Gavin Long Correspondence, Rowell AWM, quoted in Horner, *High Command, op. cit.*, pp.87,98.

⁹¹ Lt. Col. Macky, Report on Operations 21 Battalion in Greece, Cody Correspondence, 21 Battalion in Greece, WA II 3/8 NZNA.

⁹² K. L. Stewart, note on Campaign Narrative, p.476, para 37, WA II 3 Acc 2452 3/49 NZNA.

⁹³ K. L. Stewart to Kippenberger, letter, 11 February 1954, WA II 3/16b NZNA.

⁹⁴ J.F. Cody, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 21 Battalion*, Wellington, 1953, p.70.

⁹⁵ Freyberg to J. F. Cody, letter, 9 May 1951, WA II 3/8 NZNA.

Gorge that very nearly captured Kippenberger after the Servia Pass demolitions. Macky's battalion had been ejected from the gorge by one-and-a-half platoons of infantry, six Mark II tanks, two of which had been disabled, and after suffering only four casualties.⁹⁶ Kippenberger regarded it "as a classic example of bad dispositions and a bad order ... causing a fiasco".⁹⁷ Despite his opinion of this action, Kippenberger believed the Greek withdrawal on the whole to have been "very well conducted".⁹⁸ The Pinios Gorge action highlights the crucial importance of the CO and his ability to read terrain, instil fighting spirit and "grip" his battalion in action. Kippenberger, though his performance was not without fault, had survived these tests while Macky had not.

Despite the fact that the campaign was a retreat of 300 miles in three weeks over very difficult terrain while constantly harassed from the air it is possible and probably fair to state, however, that Greece did not really test Kippenberger's abilities as a military commander. Kippenberger admitted as much in a post-war summary of the campaign: "We had a certain amount of fighting but not very much. We were bombed and many difficult and hazardous moves were executed extremely well in the rearguard retreat".⁹⁹ A greater test awaited him in the next campaign when on the island of Crete Kippenberger would not command his beloved 20 Battalion, but would instead face a whole new command experience as commander of a ragtag composite brigade. How well Kippenberger faced this new test of command and how well the New Zealand Division performed during the Crete campaign is covered in the next chapter.

⁹⁶ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 21 January 1954, WA II 11/7 NZNA.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ Kippenberger to Stewart, letter, 25 February 1954, Glue Papers.

⁹⁹ "20th Reunion and Welcome Home to Major General H.K. Kippenberger, CB, CBE, DSO and Bar, Souvenir Booklet", p.4.