

*Reorganisation of Command.*

20. It was obvious that, if successful close support was to be provided, a certain reorganization of my forces was necessary. It was quite out of the question to attempt to keep in touch with a fluctuating battle in Albania from a headquarters in Athens, and if immediate and constant support was to be given, my aircraft must operate nearer the front. Accordingly, I formed a wing headquarters in the area of operations, and moved part of my bomber force to a landing ground which was found to be sufficiently dry close to the front. For the first few days, until road communication could be established, this landing ground was provisioned by air. I delegated the command and operation of all the bomber aircraft engaged in this operation, and a fighter squadron, to the commander of the wing, who was in constant touch with the Greek commander conducting the land operations. From a purely local and spectacular point of view, this form of co-operation was an instant and complete success. The morale of the Greek soldiers was raised considerably and I received fulsome praise and appreciation of the work carried out by the pilots. I was even approached by one divisional commander who implored me to order my pilots not to fly so low over the Italians for fear they would be shot down. Our efforts were made much of in official communiques, and I think that, during this particular period, the prestige of the R.A.F. was higher in the minds of the Greek nation than at any other period during our stay. I felt the whole time, however, that this high regard was based on false premises for, although we were invigorating our friends, we were misemploying our aircraft. Later events proved this to be the case. If the weather had been kinder, the Greeks might have succeeded in attaining their objective, but heavy falls of snow and rain held up their progress, and early in March, the Italians who had been able to assemble reinforcements, staged a heavy counter attack which, although held by the Greek forces, destroyed all hopes of capturing Valona.

Actually, even if we had employed our bomber force solely on ports of disembarkation in Albania, I doubt very much whether we could have interfered to any great extent with the flow of Italian reinforcements. Our available bomber force was small, the weather was bad, and it was clear that, after their recent defeat in Cyrenaica, the Italians were determined to avoid another reverse which might have had disastrous results on the nation as a whole. Freed from the necessity of supporting their North African front, they had the troops available, and under the conditions prevailing at the time it would have been difficult to prevent their arrival in Albania.

*Arrival of Hurricane Aircraft.*

21. During the latter part of this period, an event of considerable importance concerning our fighter strength occurred. The first six Hurricane aircraft appeared in Greece. Up till now, the pilots in our two fighter squadrons had been doing grand work with their Gladiators, but with the gradual appearance of faster and better types of Italian aircraft, they were finding themselves at a disadvantage, and their re-equipment with a more modern type was most welcome. The first appearance of these

well known fighter aircraft over Athens was greeted with the greatest enthusiasm by the local population and it was not long before they justified fully their reputation of being first class fighting aircraft. On their first sortie over the lines on 20th February, they shot down four enemy aircraft, and on 28th February, in company with a formation of Gladiators, destroyed 27 enemy aircraft without a single loss to themselves. This fight, which was the biggest ever fought in the air in Albania, was staged over the Greek lines in full view of both armies. All the enemy aircraft destroyed were confirmed from the ground and caused the greatest jubilation.

MARCH-APRIL, 1941.

*Decision to send a British expeditionary force.*

22. The opening of this final phase of the campaign in Greece was notable for the decision taken at long last to send a British expeditionary force to the country. The Germans had by now completed their subjugation of Roumania and were repeating their customary penetration tactics this time into Bulgaria. The usual stories of the arrival of tourists and reports of preparations being carried out on aerodromes and lines of communication had been coming in for some time, and it was all too clear that it was only a matter of time before the German armies would be ensconced on the Greek northern frontier. The attitude of the Yugoslavs, on whom the defence of the northern Greek territory depended so much, was strictly non-committal and unsatisfactory. The Greeks, realising fully the seriousness of the situation, were in no doubts that, if they allowed British fighting troops to enter their country, war with Germany was ultimately unavoidable. To their lasting credit, however, they preferred to accept such a situation rather than have to submit when the time came to a tame capitulation in face of overwhelming force. In consequence of this decision, a British force was rapidly assembled in Egypt and the first troops started to arrive in Greece on the 7th of March.

23. I do not propose to give a description of the dispositions or activities of this force, which presumably are included in detail in the G.O.C.'s report, except in so far as they affect the air operations in my command. The general role of this force was to support the Greek armies against a German threat from the north, and much discussion took place as to where this help could best be given. It was eventually decided that, owing to the shortage of time available before it was considered that Germany's preparations would be completed, and to the doubtful attitude of Yugo-Slavia, it would be unwise to move up to the Greek-Bulgarian frontier. Arrangements were therefore made for a defensive line to be prepared and occupied in suitable country west of Salonika, covering the Larissa plain.

*Preparations for the Arrival of the B.E.F.*

24. As time was all important now, everything had to be subordinated to get this defensive position prepared and the force assembled. Engineering works on aerodromes which were not of immediate importance had to be stopped so that camps could be constructed, roads repaired, and all the preparations necessary to receive the force could be made. Similarly, in view of the necessity to avoid congestion at the docks, we were forced to