

two isolated cases. This, combined with the fact that the military and civil authorities were very properly endeavouring to send away all redundant personnel and stores as quickly and inconspicuously as possible in local ships, threw a great strain both on my staff and on the staffs of the Naval Control Service Officer and the Divisional Sea Transport Officer, whose numbers had already been greatly reduced by casualties. The language problem added to our difficulties.

The Changing Military Situation.

3. The military situation in Greece changed very quickly from day to day, and was constantly deteriorating due to three main factors. The first factor was the gradual change in the morale of the Greek fighting services, which though very mercurial was deteriorating on the whole. The second factor was the reduction of our Air Force to such small proportions that its support became completely inadequate—this chiefly due to the small numbers of our aircraft available in Greece, and to the loss of aerodromes as the Army retired. The resultant German air superiority showed itself in massed attacks on shipping in Greek waters, 23 ships being destroyed in two days, in the entire immobilisation of our armies by day, and in the severe bombing of roads in rear of our armies on which our troops depended both for their supplies and for their retirement. The third factor was the sudden collapse of the Greek Army in the Epirus region, which caused an immediate withdrawal from the Thermopylae line and hastened in an unexpected manner the date of final evacuation.*

Decisions Regarding Dates, Beaches and Numbers.

4. Further, the exact military situation at the front was usually obscure to General Headquarters in Athens, and seldom determined until some 18 to 24 hours after troops had moved, owing to the great unreliability of wireless in the mountain regions. This necessitated action with regard to shipping being taken in ample time, observing that 600 miles separated our bases and the coast of Greece. Even during the passage of our ships the situation could and did alter very considerably, and a selection of the right beaches under these conditions was no easy matter.

5. Owing to the very difficult nature of the military operations and the confused political situation, it was exceedingly difficult to arrive at firm figures in regard to dates and numbers. As an example of this, it was found to be impossible to obtain the date for D.T. of the operation until approximately 48 hours before the evacuation was actually due to begin. Also estimated numbers for the total lift fluctuated between a minimum of 32,000 and a maximum of 56,000.

Admiralty footnote :—

* The deterioration in Greek Army morale and the sudden collapse of the Greek forces in Epirus were due largely to the hopelessness of the military situation after the German attack, to the demoralising effect of the lack of air support, to exhaustion to which Greece had become subjected after many months of fighting against an enemy materially and numerically superior, and to the dispiriting effect on the front line units of having to withdraw from positions which they had previously won by dint of many months of hard hand to hand fighting.

Failure of the Enemy to Bomb Embarkation Beaches.

6. In this particular, we were fortunate. The enemy made no attempt to bomb our evacuation beaches or our ships by night. This may have been partly due to our policy of not permitting ships to reach beaches till one hour after dark and so making it more difficult for the enemy to find the exact beaches in use. Or it may have been due to lack of flares or the enemy's deliberate policy to make use of daylight only.

Whatever the reason, our evacuation was certainly very much simplified by the enemy's failure in this respect.

Combined Headquarters.

7. The combined headquarters and Joint Planning Staff which was established at G.H.Q. of the British Troops in Greece immediately on my arrival in Athens, worked very smoothly indeed and I should like here to express my appreciation of the co-operation and great assistance I and my staff received from Brigadier Galloway, Brigadier Brunskill, Lieutenant Colonel Davy and Group Captain Pelly, R.A.F., and all the members of the Army Staff at G.H.Q. without exception.

8. Nevertheless, as strangers in a strange town with many contacts to be established and our way to find about, the task of my staff was no easy one and might easily have had a less successful ending for these reasons alone; I submit, therefore, that in the future, whenever forces of the Army or Air Force are sent to another country by sea, it should be recognised that it is essential to appoint a Senior Naval Officer to the country of their destination. No doubt in this case, Rear Admiral Turle, the Naval Attaché in Athens, was able to carry out these duties efficiently while everything was going evenly according to plan, but as soon as a hitch occurred, his diplomatic duties increased at the same rate as did other problems. The result was that I and my staff had to be despatched in a hurry to function in surroundings new to us all, in itself a great handicap, whereas a properly established Senior Naval Officer on the spot would no doubt have functioned far more easily and with less chance of a disastrous finish.

Beach Parties.

9. The numbers of the beach parties allocated to the operation proved to be sufficient and their composition well balanced. The information brought in by beach reconnaissance parties, together with that supplied by Captain Razikostikas, Hydrographer of the Greek Navy, proved, in the event, to be accurate and was invaluable to the conduct of the evacuation. This officer was most helpful and obliging, and the Greek Admiralty at all times most helpful.

Landing Craft.

10. The operation was to a great extent rendered possible by the employment of considerable numbers of our own landing craft. Of the total approximate number of 47,000 embarked, only 14,000 were taken from recognised wharves or piers, the balance being taken from open beaches in landing craft and ships' boats.