

## GREEK CAMPAIGN

### Gunner Charles John Burnett, 2/1<sup>st</sup> Anti-Tank Regt, 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division

#### Notes:

- 1 Handwritten comments, details, records and references taken directly from Chas Burnett's original documents (copies kindly supplied by his daughter Laurel) quoted here in black font.
- 2 Additional data, deductions and reasoned assumptions from Archivist's researches in red font.
- 3 There are numerous notes in the diary which remain total or partial unknowns.
- 4 There are also many names & addresses of relatives and friends/acquaintances.

#### Timeline

- 3-4-31 Landed at Athens
- 5-4-41 Left Athens (by road) for Salonika Very beautiful country.
- 6-4-41 German Army crossed the Bulgarian and Yugoslavian borders with northern Greece to start the assault.
- 7-4 to 11-4-41 Australian 6<sup>th</sup> Division *et al* deployed in and around Florina valley.  
2/1<sup>st</sup> Anti-Tank Regt defending Vevi Pass.

#### Battle of Vevi Pass

From Wikipedia:

##### **German main assault**

*At 08:30 on 12 April (09:00 according to one German source), the main German attack was launched. Without artillery preparation, the 1st Company of LSSAH, acting as the vanguard of KG Witt on its left flank, attacked the key Hill 997, which was occupied by a company of the 2/8th Battalion, under Captain Bill Robertson. After hard close fighting, by 11:00 they had captured the Hill, having in the process overrun an Australian platoon of which only six men survived. At 12.30 the 7th KG Witt' company extended the attack toward Hill 917 which it captured after strong resistance by 14:00. The Hill was defended by an Australian company under Captain Coombes at the far left of 2/8th's sector, near where it adjoined the 1st Rangers.*

*According to the Australian official history, at 11:00 the 1st Rangers – possibly believing that the 2/8th was retreating – began to withdraw. This opened the pass itself to the Germans, created a gap between the 2/4th and 2/8th Battalions, severed communications between Vasey and the 2/8th and left Australian anti-tank guns without infantry protection. To the west of the battlefield, the Greek 21st Infantry Brigade reported at 12:00 that it had lost contact with the Australian 2/4 Battalion. At 13:00, the Dodecanese Regiment reported that the Australians of the 2/8th Battalion were retreating, although the Regiment itself had taken no such order yet. The two companies of the 2/8th Battalion on the western flank (Coombes' and Robertson's), were forced to retreat up the slopes.*

*However, in the words of Australian official historian Gavin Long: "At 2:00 pm ... Lt.-Col. [John] Mitchell of the 2/8th ... ordered a counter-attack which regained some vital ground on top of the ridge... After six hours of intermittent fighting in the pass and on the slopes to the east, the 2/8th still held the Hills though their left had been mauled; the Rangers, however, were rallying astride the road about two miles to the rear, but five of the six supporting guns of the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment had been left without protection and abandoned. Thus the ridge held by the 2/8th formed a deep salient.*

*According to Long, Vasey was informed of the Rangers' withdrawal by officers from other units, but refused to believe it. The Dodecanese line began taking artillery fire at 14:30, concentrated mostly on Delinski Dol. In the west, the Greek 21st Brigade reported from 14:30 that groups of Australians were retreating south towards Xino Nero.*

*From 14:35 a number of assault guns and Panzerjäger vehicles had arrived to support the 1st and 7th companies of KG Witt.*

*Following the earlier German successes, the 2nd Company of LSSAH and a heavy machine gun platoon attacked west of the road, with the 3rd Company astride and left (east) of the road, the 7th Company attacking from Hill 917 to the west of Klidi village and the 1st Company from Hill 997 to the east of Klidi*

village. By 15:30, the 2nd and 3rd Companies had captured Hill 1009 in the 1st Rangers' sector, reducing British machine gun positions with heavy weapons. At 16:00 the forces fighting against KG Witt began to retreat and carried out demolitions on the road. KG Witt attacked forward, and pioneers coming behind the 3rd company started to open a corridor in the Allied minefield eventually allowing two assault guns (StuG) to pass through. Simultaneously, III/LSSAH and Vorausabteilung Apell began their attacks.

### **The main Allied withdrawal begins**

With German artillery fire on the Greek lines becoming more intense, at 15:40, Mackay ordered the Dodecanese Regiment to retreat immediately and to have completed the evacuation of its positions by 18:00 (bringing forward the withdrawal scheduled for 19:00). At 16:30, the Regiment began its withdrawal, after destroying its artillery pieces which could not be evacuated. When the Regiment began its retreat, it reported that no Commonwealth forces were to be seen in the Kirli Derven sector. According to German sources, III/LSSAH began its attack toward Kelli at 16:20.

In the west at 16:00, the German attack was extended against the Greek 1/88th Battalion, which began taking artillery and mortar fire. Between 16:30 and 18:00, a force reported by the Greeks as elements of the German vanguard – primarily the 9th Reconnaissance Battalion and the I/11 SchützenBattalion – concentrated against the battalion's sector (Radosi Hill), and came to assaulting distance, under harassing fire from the Greeks.

The 2/8th had been exposed on two flanks by the Greek and British withdrawals; it was soon coming under German machine gun fire from the east. According to an official Australian account, Vasey "realised his men were not going to be able to stage an orderly withdrawal. At 17:00, he telephoned the commanding officer of the 2/4th Battalion ... with the code phrase indicating that a pull-out was now vital – "the roof is leaking."

At 17:30, the Australian official history reported that 500 German infantry supported by self-propelled guns attacked in force along the width of the 2/8th's sector. A German participant of the battle Obersturmbannführer Kurt Meyer, wrote later of his surprise at how easily the heavy StuGs had climbed the slopes. "We watched the guns advance in amazement. They climbed higher and higher, and then joined the fight. Nobody [had] thought it possible to use them, but now they were up there, giving valuable support to the infantry. Completely shaken by the impression German shelling had made on them, British [sic] prisoners came down the mountain. They were tall, strong fellows and formidable opponents." The self-propelled guns effectively sealed the Allies' defeat at Vevi. The 2/8th Battalion was forced into a chaotic retreat, with component units being separated and officers ordering the abandonment even of light weapons, to speed the withdrawal. Losses among the Australian infantry would have been much worse it were not for the 2/1st Anti-Tank Regiment and the British Royal Horse Artillery standing their ground in the centre, until the Germans were only 400 metres (440 yards) away.

According to German sources at 18:00 the 7th and 1st Companies of LSSAH captured the village of Klidi, having taken 82 prisoners. A little later the 3rd company captured the exit of the rail tunnel taking another 250 New Zealand, British and Australian prisoners. Both Greek and German sources agree that III/LSSAH was in Kelli at 18:15 and subsequently occupied vacant Greek positions, also reaching Petra by 20:15. However, German sources report that Greek units were still fighting to the far east at 20:00, when 40 Greek and 60 Australian prisoners were taken.

### **Final phase**

The early collapse of the Commonwealth lines in the Klidi Pass, allowed German forces to advance south of the pass before the Dodecanese Regiment had completed its withdrawal to the west. Its right column (consisting of the III and I battalions, as well as the regimental HQ company) was attacked by "about 20 German tanks" (actually six StuG and nine PzJg I) at 18:00 west of Amyntaion, with fire from a distance of 800–1,000 m (870–1,090 yd). The column was saved by the timely intervention of 25–30 British tanks that prevented their capture.

In the west, the positions of the Greek 88th Regiment were assaulted at 18:30. After a brief uneven clash at close quarters, the Germans overran the 88th, which reeled back toward Aetos. According to Greek sources, an attempted counterattack was aborted when the 88th Regiment's commander was killed; however, German sources mention repulsing a Greek attack against the German right flank at 19:00 (which conforms to the actual disposition of forces, with the Greek regimental HQ south-west of the German attack).

Meanwhile, to the east, at 19:00 the 12th and 13th companies of III/LSSAH marched over Hill 1202 (presumably Delinski Dol, noted in Greek maps as Hill 1200), to the east, while the 14th company west of Lake Petron to the village of Petres. The 2nd company attacked astride the road followed closely by the

3rd company, while the 1st and 7th came down from the Hills flanking the pass toward Sotir. At 21:00 operations stopped at a line extending from the east of Xino Nero almost to Sotir.

At 20:00, the remnants of the Greek 88th Regiment had started to arrive at Aetos. It had suffered 11 killed, 18 wounded (including its commander) and 96 captured (some of them wounded). The Regiment began to reorganise, although its numbers were only sufficient to form one company. German casualties were reported by the Greeks as "heavy".

German sources also report that elements of the Vorausabteilung Appell captured Hill 966 (Seveskeravi Hill) at 22:30 after hard fighting against Australians. However, the hill belonged to the Greek sector and is not mentioned in the Australian or Greek official histories.



Members of the Australian **2/1st Anti-Tank Regiment** resting, 13 April 1941, after their withdrawal from the Vevi area (alas without Chas Burnett). The unit suffered heavy losses in the first German attacks on Australian positions in Greece.

12-4-41	Captured
13-4-41	Florina, Greece
14-4-41	First feed (had to eat grass on the march)
16-4-41	In Prison Camp at Florina, Greece. Well treated.