

GREEK CAMPAIGN

Driver Edward John Peachey, 46 L.A.D., 17 Brigade HQ, 6 Div AIF

Australian 17th Brigade involvement in the Greek Campaign

Archivist's Note: There follows a brief compilation of excerpts from the official Australian account in order to describe some of the places and actions involving 17 Brigade and its HQ during this crucial period of the Greek Campaign. It is assumed that Driver Peachey and his Unit were participants in these activities. It is also tentatively assumed that "46 L.A.D." refers to a "Light Air Defence" unit dedicated primarily to HQ anti-aircraft protection.

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Chapter 5, The Critical Days

(On the 15th April) . . . it seems likely that the conviction of the British leader (General Wilson) and his staff that the Greek army east of the Pindus was broken derived partly from early impressions of the poor equipment of the Greek Army and largely from its appearance on the roads. The Greeks tramped along the sides of the roads in small groups, wearing dingy uniforms, and using an odd variety of means of transport such as donkeys, farm carts, and a few old motor vehicles. Particularly might reports of confusion and retreat have reached Wilson from observers at various headquarters, who, in a withdrawal (whether Greek or British) inevitably saw more of the service troops moving back than of the fighting men still at their forward posts .

Nevertheless, on the evidence arriving at his headquarters, Wilson saw a serious threat to his inland flank . If the Germans sped south along the Grevena road they might reach the Larisa bottleneck from that direction and cut his road to Athens . He decided to use his only reserve - the 17th Brigade, whose units were then disembarking at Piraeus - to guard this flank.

On the 13th of April, Brigadier Savige, commander of the 17th, arrived at Blarney's headquarters for orders. He and his headquarters had reached Larisa on the 11th, but his three battalions and the 2/11th, the missing battalion of Vasey's brigade, had disembarked at Piraeus only on the afternoon of the 12th and were still in Athens . When he arrived at Blarney's headquarters Wilson was there. Savige was instructed to reconnoitre (a) the road leading from Larisa through Kalabaka as far west as the summit of the Pindus mountains about Metsovon - the road leading to the rear of the Epirus Army, and (b) the Kalabaka-Grevena road - along which the 1st Armoured Brigade and the Western Macedonian Army were then withdrawing . Savige immediately set off and, with his liaison officer, Lieutenant Lowen, drove from Larisa, through Kalabaka, without seeing any Greek troops. Thence they drove into the Pindus to a point above the snow-line whence they could see the Adriatic . When they returned to Kalabaka the town was crowded with Greek troops .

Early on the 14th Savige was recalled to Blarney's headquarters where a discussion took place in which Brigadier Galloway pressed Wilson's request that the 17th Brigade should be sent promptly to Kalabaka . While these three were talking Rowell entered and said that information had arrived that the Germans had broken through the Greeks on the left.

Thereupon Blarney ordered Savige to occupy a line covering Kalabaka. Savige recommended holding an area covering both the road to Grevena and the road through the Pindus and this was agreed to . His force was to include the 2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th and 2/11th Battalions with artillery and other supporting arms . The 2/5th and 2/11th were expected to arrive at Larisa by rail at 9 a.m. that day .

A written order, not signed until that evening, gave Savige the task of holding the junction of the Pindus and Grevena roads and preparing to move north to support the armoured brigade, probably on the Venetikos River. His force was to consist initially of the four battalions mentioned above, seven cruiser tanks of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, two troops of the 64th Medium Regiment, a battery of New Zealand field artillery , a battery of Australian anti-tank artillery, a company of the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion, the 2/2nd Field Company, and 2/2nd Field Ambulance. The dispatch rider who was to deliver Savige's copy of this order was delayed and Savige did not see it until the morning of the 15th when Lieut-Colonel Garrett, allotted to him from Blarney's staff as "Operations Staff Officer", arrived at his headquarters.

Not only were the roads becoming dangerously congested but the railways were disorganised . The confusion can be illustrated by the experiences of the two battalions of the 17th Australian Brigade on their move from Athens to Thessaly . The train carrying the 2/6th stopped south of Pharsala for nine hours on the night of the 14th-15th because the crew feared that it might be attacked from the air. The train bearing the 2/7th was under a prolonged attack from the air near Larisa on the following night, and the crew disappeared . However, in the early hours of the morning some Victorian railwaymen led by Corporal "Jock " Taylor, who had shown himself in the fighting in Cyrenaica to be an outstandingly cool and intrepid leader, Corporal Melville, 8 and Private Naismith, fired one engine and left it with the fire-box door open as a decoy to delude the German aircraft and, while bombers were attacking it, manned another engine 500 yards away and made up a train into which the battalion was loaded and taken to Domokos .

The 2/6th Battalion had arrived at Domokos by train on the 16th ; the 2/7th, in the train its own men had made up and driven, arrived from Larisa whither they had been carried on, on the morning of the 17th .By nightfall on the 17th the 2/6th Battalion (plus a company of the 2/5th which had travelled from Athens with it) was in position on the right of the road on the foothills north of Domokos, the 2/7th on the left. The depleted 2/4th and 2/8th were in reserve.

Thus by midnight on the 17th four of the seven brigades in the British force, hidden from enemy aircraft by the providential rain and mist, had passed safely through the Larisa bottleneck and were in either the Domokos or the Thermopylae positions or strung out along the road to Lamia . One of the two critical days was over, but the more hazardous task still lay ahead: to extricate the three remaining brigades (two of which were certain to be hard pressed throughout the day) along three roads converging at Larisa, and thence along a single crowded road across the plain of Thessaly, over one pass at Pharsala, over another at Domokos, and to the escarpment overlooking Lamia. . . .

It remains to record the experiences of Brigadier Savige's force on this day . Savige had placed Lieut-Colonel King of the 2/5th in command of a rearguard consisting of one company of infantry and detachments of tanks, artillery and machine-guns, which took up a position about five miles east of Kalabaka, with orders to retire one hour after the main body had passed him . The 2/11th were on the road to Zarkos before dawn and had occupied a position there by 10 a .m. At 11 a .m. the 2/2nd Field Company began blowing up sections of the road, having prepared demolitions at eight points extending from a tunnel three miles beyond Kalabaka on the west to road bridges in Trikkala to the east. Part of Savige Force crossed the Pinios over the undamaged bridge on a by-pass road a few miles north of Syn Tomai, but about 1130 a .m. three enemy aircraft bombed this bridge which had been prepared for demolition. One bomb dropped near the bridge, the explosive charges were set off either by bomb splinters or sympathetic detonation, and the bridge was destroyed.

The only route for vehicles was now a long detour through Tirnavos . The engineers improvised a ferry over the river near the demolished bridge on the main road and the men who remained on the western side crossed this way . The empty vehicles were sent through Tirnavos whence they circled round through much-bombed Larisa to the east bank of the river and picked up the men waiting there.

Meanwhile in an order timed 1 p .m. Mackay had instructed Savige to move the 2/11th Battalion from Zarkos to a position on the west bank of the river to defend the left flank until 3 a .m. on the 19th - the same time as that at which Allen had been ordered to defend the right flank. This order caused Savige some concern as it would entail moving the 2/11th across the river in the early hours of the next morning in darkness. He decided that his role could be carried out equally well on the east bank and moved the 2/11th across the river in the ferry in the late afternoon and early part of the night . His force as a whole was to begin moving south at 9 p.m., the rearguard at 3 a .m. . . .

In the late afternoon the engineers responsible for demolitions along this section of the Pinios and for the two mishaps, reported to Major Wilson, commanding the 2/2nd Field Company, that a bridge between Tsiotion and Palamas had not been blown or even prepared for demolition. Wilson found it impossible to reach this bridge from the south bank of the Pinios, but feared that it might give the Germans a route to Pharsala through Karditsa . He therefore assembled a small demolition party under Warrant-Officer Crawford . This party, with a utility, was ferried back across the Pinios and put on to the Trikkala road at dusk. There were then no British troops on the Trikkala side of the Pinios. Crawford led the party back to the bridge and destroyed it. About midnight they rejoined the rearguard on the eastern bank. The 2/11th Battalion was deployed on the east side of the Pinios by 8 p.m. A quarter of an hour later the 2/5th set off towards Larisa in its vehicles. The 2/11th followed at 3 a .m. and the tail of its column cleared Larisa about 4 a .m.

Chapter 6, The Thermopylae Line

(On the Brallos Pass, south of Lamia) . . . during the 21st, on the Australian front, the 2/11th relieved the 2/5th in the rugged, scrub-covered country on the 19th Brigade's right . At midday on the 20th Savige, whose brigade then included only the 2/6th and 2/7th Battalions, the 2/5th being in Vasey's, had received orders from Sutherland to guard four road and track exits from the mountains to the west of the Brallos position and cover the Lamia-Brallos road in depth from a point one mile north-west of Brallos . The effect of this would be to echelon the 17th Brigade behind the 19th and protect the left flank .

At dusk, however, Savige received new orders, issued to him by Rowell in Mackay's presence. These were to take over part of Vasey's left flank and occupy a line covering the gorge through which the railway ran and extending along high ground about one mile to the west of Oiti (Gardikaki). In addition his left flank was to be refused for a further distance of about a mile and a half. His total front would be about six miles measured on the map . The road and track exits on the west were now made the responsibility of the 16th Brigade (two weak battalions). In conference on the 21st Savige and Vasey agreed that Savige should take over all the ground which Vasey then held west of the Lamia-Brallos road.

The country on this flank was extremely rugged. A road marked on the map as leading into the area was found to peter out, but another practicable road was found which was not on the map. By dusk on the 21st the 2/7th Battalion was in position from the main road about four miles forward of Brallos to the railway and just beyond, with the 2/6th extending the line for about four miles to the west. That day the 2/5th Battalion returned to Savige's command and went into reserve just west of Brallos .

Thus, as deployment continued, the disadvantages of the new position became increasingly apparent . Each of the two main roads needed at least a division to defend it, and although the New Zealand Division was still "reasonably complete", three battalions of the Australian had been greatly reduced in strength. It seemed probable that the enemy would make a flanking move along the island of Euboea . The New Zealand Division's positions could be shelled by guns concealed in the rolling country across the strait, whereas its own guns were in exposed positions on the face of an escarpment or at its foot . The plain of Thebes offered the enemy an excellent field in which to land paratroops in the rear of the defending force, which could spare only a few carriers and other troops to protect that area . The left flank was open to attack by an enemy force moving from Epirus towards Amfissa and the Delphi Pass . This danger was underlined by the news that the "Adolf Hitler" Division had reached Yannina, the Greek Army of Epirus had surrendered, and the way to the Gulf of Corinth lay open.

On the night of the 23rd-24th the withdrawal of the 17th Brigade from its position on the left of the line and the movement of the combined 16th and 17th Brigades to Megara to await embarkation were achieved remarkably smoothly. Savige's orders provided that the 2/6th Battalion on the left would begin thinning out at 7 p .m. and hold its forward posts until 9, the 2/7th would begin thinning out at 8 .30 and hold its forward posts until 9.30. Despite the fact that the forward battalions were deployed over a six-mile front and had to scramble out of extremely rough country, the time-table was adhered to . At daybreak Colonel Prior of Mackay's staff halted the column at Eleusis, where there was good cover and, all that day (the 24th), the men of "Allen Group" lay concealed and resting in olive groves on each side of the Athens road . The diarist of the provost company of the 6th Division underlined the wisdom of Mackay's order that lights (dimmed) should be used in the withdrawal. . . .

On the 24th (as Wilson had forecast to Blarney) the plan of embarkation was revised with the object of moving farther south, reducing the numbers to be lifted from Theodora, Argos and Navplion, and making more use of destroyers and of the comparatively distant beach at Kalamata. Finally Theodora was abandoned and Brigadier Parrington was sent to take command at Kalamata . Arrangements were made also to take aboard there about 2,000 Yugoslav soldiers and refugees who had retreated down the Greek peninsula . Under the revised plan one of the largest groups, Allen's combined 16th and 17th Brigades, would not embark from Megara on the 24th-25th but would move to the Argos area and possibly make a further move to Kalamata and not embark until the 26th-27th. . . .

Allen's staff consisted only of his brigade major, his Intelligence officer, and two junior officers from the divisional staff, yet the strength of his group approached that of a division - it included seven battalions and two artillery regiments. He organised it into four sections; including the 16th Brigade and attached troops under Colonel Lamb and the 17th Brigade and attached troops under Brigadier Savige.

Chapter 7, The Embarkation from Greece

At Kalamata from 18,000 to 20,000 troops were now assembled, about one-third being of Allen Group (the 16th and 17th Brigades and corps troops) and most of the remainder a medley of base troops, Yugoslays and others. The survivors of the 4th Hussars and the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion were on their way to Kalamata.

Brigadier Allen had urged upon Brigadier Parrington, who was in command of the embarkation area, that fighting men, being the most valuable, should be embarked first. Parrington issued an order late in the afternoon stating that the men were to be divided into four groups. The first included Allen's two brigades; the second, under Colonel Lister, comprised all troops north-east of Kalamata; the third, under a Major Pemberton, those who had arrived by train; and the fourth, under his camp commandant, those not elsewhere included. . . . It was essential, wrote Parrington, that "the highest standard of discipline be observed in accordance with Imperial traditions". Allen, Savage and their staffs allotted serial numbers within their own force. Medical units came first, then artillery, engineers, infantry and so on. . . .

On the 26th . . . Savage received . . . new instruction(s) about destroying vehicles about 9.15 p.m. The vehicles of three of his battalions - 2/5th, 2/6th and 2/7th - and of the 2/2nd Field Ambulance were still on the far side of Kalamata.

Savage gave Captain Gray the task of organising the destruction of the vehicles and arranging the transport of the drivers to the beach. About 11 .30 the drivers had not arrived. Savage pointed out to Gray that he alone knew where their various rendezvous were and the routes along which they would reach them and asked him to go back and try to get them forward in time.

About 2.15 a .m. Savage found that his 2/7th, 2/8th Battalions, his engineers and field ambulance had embarked, and his 2/6th Battalion, 2/1st Field Regiment and brigade headquarters were drawn up beside a destroyer which was then berthing. The 2/5th Battalion was missing. It was found behind the solid mass of troops waiting to embark after Allen's force, and was led forward and embarked.

It was then about 2.45, and Allen had just been informed that no more destroyers would pull in that night but that ships would return the following night. Gray and the drivers had not arrived and therefore Allen decided to leave two of his staff officers, Captains Woodhill and Vial, ashore to collect these men and embark them next night. Believing that all except these drivers had embarked, Allen and Savage boarded the last destroyer, but it had just swung away from the wharf when Captain Tyrrell, in charge of the men of 17th Brigade HQ, called from the quay; his men were standing there in their ranks. In fact it turned out that several other groups from Allen's force had been left behind—a detachment of the 2/1st Field Regiment and the commanding officer, Lieut-Colonel Harlock, who was trying to ensure its embarkation; the Yugoslav anti-aircraft gunners; and some others. The total number embarked is uncertain but certainly exceeded 8,000 - by far the largest number taken off one beach on a single night.

One man who waited in vain that night described the scene :

We just came, in straggling dozens and scores, to a line of figures in the darkness, all facing to the left. We tried to move around them, and saw that they were in a queue. It was quite unreckoned for, and shocking. We got to the end and there, with the light coming off the water, we could see it and it was up to twenty men deep and two hundred yards long, a great packed rectangle of thousands of men. They stood very still, not talking, not smoking; there was an occasional cough, and over the top of the block there played a continual little motion as men raised themselves off their heels to look to the front