

## GREEK CAMPAIGN

### Gunner Ronald Hadaway, 106<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Hussars, RHA

Archivist's Note: As is sometimes the case with both official and personal War Diaries, there are frequent and inexplicable inconsistencies and conflicts between one account and another, and even within the same one. A further dimension of potential confusion may also be caused by the fading and distorting prism of hindsight and the influence of other people's recollections being at variance. Because of this, a selection of seemingly equally authoritative internet-accessed references to the movements of 106<sup>th</sup> Regiment are included below. The situation is further confused by the absence of clear indications as to which Battery is involved. The various Batteries were attached to different fighting Units and saw action at different places in Greece and Crete at different times and in different capacities (anti-tank or anti-aircraft).

The broader histories laid out below will be followed by the inclusion of what little direct personal information we have from Ron Hadaway himself, as related to and by his daughter.

#### 1 From WW2Talk:

"The regiment was converted to 106th Light AA Regiment RA (Lancashire Hussars) (TA) on 14 March 1941 with batteries becoming 271st and 272nd Light AA Batteries respectively. 273rd Light AA Battery was also formed and added. It gave up its anti-tank guns and was hastily re-equipped with thirty-six 20mm Breda guns captured from the Italians in the desert. It was sent to Piraeus, Greece in March 1941\*. It was located in the southern area defending the route forward at the start of the campaign. On 9 April, the regiment was sent forward as part of 19th Australian Infantry Brigade to hold the pass at Veve. After (that) the remaining 20 guns of the regiment covered the withdrawal. It destroyed its guns during attacks on Argos airfield and after leaving Athens was evacuated to Crete. One section of the regiment fought on Crete with two 2-pounder guns under 19th Australian Infantry Brigade at Georgeopolis. The rest of the regiment fought as infantry at Suda Bay. By 1 June, remnants of the regiment were evacuated from Crete and returned to Egypt to refit and reequip. By the start of the 'Battle-Axe' offensive on 15 June, the regiment was under command of 7th Armoured Division as its AA regiment. After the battle, the unit was disbanded on 1 July 1941 in Egypt, being amalgamated with 149th Anti-Tank Regiment."

\*Ron's daughter had a photograph of him manning a gun on the roof of a warehouse in Piraeus and celebrating with a bottle of beer on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday (22<sup>nd</sup> March 1941).

#### 2 From the Lancashire Hussars Regimental history:

"In March 1941, the regiment deployed to Greece via Operation Lustre as part of W Force. Upon disembarking at Piraeus, the regiment deployed to Glyfada for 2 weeks training. Thereafter, the regiment was sent to defend the airstrip at Larissa. The German advance forced the British to retreat to the town of Nauplion, where the 106th were the only AA defence. After destroying their Breda guns, the regiment was evacuated to Crete on board HMS Calcutta. Most of the regiment ended the campaign in the defence of Suda Bay in the Battle of Crete, becoming prisoners of war in the process."

#### 3 From the 106<sup>th</sup> RHA Forum:

"106th LAA were deployed in the southern area during the retreat and evacuation, one troop of the 106th remaining as rear-guard around Larissa. It was decided that the entire 'W' force were to be evacuated together and the port chosen was right at the foot of the Peloponnese at Kalamata (Archivist's Note: various other ports were also identified and used). Meanwhile the depleted guns of the 106th were (still) covering the withdrawal. On the 26th April, as the main body cleared Athens, the 106th were given orders to destroy their remaining guns. The AA detachments were armed only with a few rifles and a machine-gun each and, in the unequal struggle, their resistance was quickly overcome. Although many were taken prisoner, others escaped in the confusion and a party of about 130 reached the shore where it was rescued by HMS Orion."

Archivist's Note: HMS Orion participated in the evacuation on the night of 26/27<sup>th</sup> April from Nauplion & Tolos – also in company with HMS Calcutta and the doomed SS Slamet, among others.



**HMS Calcutta**

**4 From "Greece and Crete 1941" by Christopher Buckley:**

"During the night (of 24/25<sup>th</sup> April) the 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade with the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Field Regiment, the 106<sup>th</sup> Light A.A. Battery, an Australian anti-tank battery, and some machine gunners and sappers, occupied a covering position at Kriekouki on the Thebes road."

**5 From the Lancashire Hussars Regimental History:**

"The German advance forced the British to retreat to the town of Navplion, where the 106<sup>th</sup> were the only AA defence. After destroying their Breda guns, the regiment was evacuated to Crete on board HMS Calcutta. Most of the regiment ended the campaign in the defence of Suda Bay in the Battle of Crete, becoming prisoners of war in the process."



**"Italian Gun"**  
**Captured Libya 1940**  
**Abandoned Greece 1941**  
**106th R.H.A.**  
**Lancashire Hussars**  
**Shaw Street, Liverpool**

Archivist's Note: Not all members of the 106<sup>th</sup> shared the same fate. Bombardier Jack Swinnerton, for example, obviously didn't make it onto HMS Calcutta (or any other rescue vessel) at Navplion (or any other evacuation port). He was eventually taken prisoner at Kalamata, like so many others. He probably thought at the time that he had drawn the short straw – but things could have been a lot worse. No doubt his part of the Regiment had got split up in some dis-array during the long withdrawal from Larissa under constant aerial attack from the Luftwaffe. Gunner Douglas Arthur was one of those members of the 106<sup>th</sup> to be evacuated successfully on HMS Calcutta from Navplion to Crete, only to be taken prisoner on that island a month later. Lieutenant Frank Moss of the 106<sup>th</sup> was not so lucky – he was initially evacuated at Navplion on the Dutch troopship SS Slammat on the night of 26<sup>th</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> April. For him too the war was over, but in a much more drastic way. There were a large number of 106<sup>th</sup> Regiment troops taken on board SS Slammat that night. The vast majority perished at sea.

## 6 From HMSO 'The Campaign in Greece and Crete', published in 1942:

'On April 26<sup>th</sup> HMS Calcutta returned to Greece. "I took three merchantmen with me," said the Captain, and made for Navplion. The rest of the ships in my convoy, with escorting destroyers, went to Raftis and another fishing port Rafina. At four that afternoon, after we had separated, we had a sharp attack from eighteen JU 87's and 88's attacking in two waves of nine machines. They hit one of my transports in the engine room, disabling her, while a second vessel was hit by a small bomb but not badly damaged. When it was over I ordered the destroyer Griffin to stand by the damaged transport, which was towed into port. With the other two I arrived at Navplion about 10 o'clock. I took 960 men aboard while the destroyers Hotspur and Isis took 500 and 400. So far the weather had been perfect, but that night the wind got up with a choppy sea which made boat work more difficult. The cruisers Orion and Perth, with the destroyer Stuart appeared before midnight and embarked men from Tolon. These ships took on about 2,500 men. Further west the cruiser Phoebe, at the head of another group was evacuating men from Kalamata. I was anxious to be going, as the Germans had occupied the aerodrome at Argos a few miles north of Navplion.

At seven o'clock in the morning, April 27<sup>th</sup>, bombers came over and did not leave us until 10 a.m. We were shooting so accurately that again and again we put them off. About 7.15 one transport was hit and began sinking (SS Slammat). I ordered HMS Diamond alongside to take off troops, and about 9 a.m. three more destroyers, the Wryneck, Vampire and Voyager, joined us in the battle with the dive-bombers, so I detached the Wryneck to help with the rescue work. In that three hours the Calcutta fired about 1,200 rounds of 4" shells and many thousand rounds of pom-pom and machine-gun ammunition. The Coventry came out to relieve me, enabling me to disembark them and return to the convoy in the afternoon. One more transport was sunk, but we got all the survivors safely ashore. Then with fourteen vessels we set out and arrived without further incident yesterday.

Altogether on the night of April 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup>, 16,000 men of the Imperial forces were withdrawn from Greece. Over 8,000 of these were taken off from the Kalamata area. The destroyers Diamond and Wryneck which, as stated by the Captain of the Calcutta, had taken off survivors from the burning transport, were themselves hit by bombs and both were sunk.

HMS Diamond had about 600 men from the transport on-board and the Wryneck had 100. The transport itself had been sunk with a torpedo from the Diamond. Some fifty survivors from the Diamond and Wryneck were picked up\*. The survivors from these destroyers were repeatedly attacked by machine-gun fire from German aircraft while they were in the water."

Archivist's Note: So Jack Swinnerton's fate could so easily have been very different. Frank Moss was rescued from the Slammat only to go down with HMS Diamond shortly afterwards. \*George Dexter RASC was a very lucky man that day. He too was rescued from the Slammat by HMS Wryneck. When she was then bombed and sunk he survived a second time. Just one of fifty soldiers, sailors and airmen from the three vessels. Figures for the death toll seem to vary, but it must have been somewhere between 800 and 1000, George survives to this day (probably the only one) and has presented the Brotherhood with a magnificent memorial stone to all those who died in this disaster, now a permanent fixture in the Greek Grove at the National Memorial Arboretum.



**HMS Diamond comes to the aid of SS Slamet**



**Frank Moss  
was lost**



**Slamat, Diamond & Wryneck  
Memorial, National Arboretum**



**George Dexter  
was saved**

Final word from Geoff, Jack Swinnerton's son: "Dad's Regiment was 550 strong, all ranks, when it left for the desert. After going to Greece and Crete about 150 were taken prisoner and about 50 escaped to Egypt. Many were killed in the retreat across Greece. Sadly a troop transport ship plus two destroyers were sunk leaving Greece with all the rest of the Regiment lost."

**Ron Hadaway's experiences:**

From the information we have to date it is not at all clear which of the various scenarios related above would be the most accurate to describe Ron's own participation in the Greek Campaign. We do not know the precise Battery (or Batteries) in which he was employed, except that it also included his special pal (and eventual fellow Stalag XVIII A PoW) Larry McDermott.

#### Pertinent statements from Ron's daughter

- i) "My father . . . was part of 106th RHA and was taken PoW after the Battle of Crete.
- ii) "He always said he was one of the last to leave mainland Greece, escaping from Volos with the Germans so close behind that the navy shelled them on the jetty whilst the escapees were being taken out to the ships."
- iii) "He told me he was part of the rear-guard action leaving Greece and that he was evacuated from Volos on the Kimberley, after being at Thermopylae".

#### Archivist's Comments:

- i) "taken PoW after the Battle of Crete" – this means he must have been landed in Crete after leaving "mainland Greece" in April and fought against the German assault on Crete in May, as did Douglas Arthur (but Arthur had been in a different Battery on the mainland before evacuation).
- ii) "one of the last to leave mainland Greece" – again this must mean "not the Peloponnesus, i.e. not south or west of the Corinth Canal", which is reiterated in his follow-on statement "escaping from Volos" – (about 200 miles north of Athens on the Aegean Sea coast).
- iii) "part of the rear-guard . . . evacuated from Volos on the Kimberley, after being at Thermopylae". (repeat reinforcement of Volos).

#### Deliberations:

- After extensive searches of the literature I have not seen a single reference to any particular named vessel evacuating troops from Volos at any time before or during Operation Demon (the total evacuation programme). The only statement I have found at all is from "The German Campaigns in the Balkans" edited by George E Blau (1953) which refers to "Volos . . . at which the British had re-embarked numerous units during the last few days, fell on 21 April, leaving stores of diesel and oil". Volos was never earmarked as one of the planned evacuation ports (much too far north) and the 21<sup>st</sup> April was before official evacuation was started. So maybe any "re-embarkation" was simply to move men and machines further south *en-masse* for re-deployment closer to Athens or to some of the planned embarkation ports?
- During Operation Demon HMS Kimberley was first involved in evacuations from Porto Rafti (27-28 April) and then from Kalamata (28 Apr-1 May). She was sent to Rafti in company with Ajax, Kingston and Havoc "to embark the rear-guard of about 3000 and the Beach Party. This was the final evacuation north of the Corinth Canal". Kimberley took off approximately 700 troops.
- The Battle of Thermopylae took place on 24-25 April about 80 miles SOUTH of Volos and 140 miles NORTH of Porto Rafti.

#### Observations and Comments

- To later have to drop back south and become part of the official large-scale "rear-guard", Ron's Battery (ident number unknown) must have earlier been part of the 106<sup>th</sup> Regt known to have been deployed in the defence of Larissa airfield, until it was over-run by the German advance on 19 April. Ron was definitely familiar with the location and involved in the action at Larissa.
- Ron states that his Battery then became part of 3000 or so rear-guard troops who (as it transpired) fought their final delaying-action at the Battle of Thermopylae, 24-25 April.
- HMS Kimberley evacuated 700 of these rear-guard troops from Porto Rafti (140 miles S of Thermopylae) during the night of 27-28 April, taking them to Suda Bay, Crete.
- HMS Kimberley did not evacuate any troops from Volos at any time.
- Volos had fallen to the Germans on 21 April – no troops would have attempted to go back there after losing out at Thermopylae - 80 miles back N through now enemy territory to an enemy-held port.

## Conclusions and possible scenario

Ron must have been mistaken about his port of departure. Let us assume that he had followed the documented route of the 106<sup>th</sup> from their disembarkation port of Piraeus via training at Glyfada to their most northerly forward position defending Larissa airfield. After Larissa was abandoned on 19<sup>th</sup> April his Battery withdrew to the south to be included in the rear-guard action at the Thermopylae Line. Resistance here ended on 25<sup>th</sup> April and the withdrawal south continued (presumably during the nights of 25-26 and 26-27 April). The nearest Operation Demon allocated evacuation destination was Porto Rafti. This is where Ron and his colleagues appear to have been directed, arriving sometime on the 27<sup>th</sup> to be boarded onto HMS Kimberley that evening and taken to Crete overnight.

In Crete he either joined up with the remnants of 106<sup>th</sup> Regt (many of whom had made their way further south, to be evacuated from Navplion on HMS Calcutta or the ill-fated SS Slamet) or was temporarily attached to the 102<sup>nd</sup> Northumberland Hussars, either in an anti-aircraft Battery or (due to a lack of surviving artillery pieces) having to fight on the ground as an infantryman. Which ever way it was short-lived. The Germans launched a hard-fought but ultimately successful airborne assault on the exposed northern airfields of Crete on 20<sup>th</sup> May. By the 30<sup>th</sup> the surviving Allied troops were once again having to be emergency-evacuated, mostly from the inhospitable south coast of the island. Over 1700 Allied troops were killed in the Battle for Crete, and approximately 12,000 captured. Ron was one of the latter.

After being taken prisoner, Ron and his fellow captives were probably first put in the hold of a merchant ship at one of Crete's north coast ports and then transported to the assembly camp at Dulag 183 in Saloniki (now Thessalonika) in northern Greece to await the well-documented privations of the dreadful 5-day cattle-truck train journey to Stalag XVIII in Austria. His daughter tells us that Ron spoke of "*Frank Hornby (of the Hornby model trains family) who was also in the regiment and was shot by guards at Salonika trying to escape and his body left on the fence for days as a deterrent to others*"