

WITH THE NEW-ZEALANDERS IN GREECE

Withdrawal to the Coast and Evacuation

By a New Zealand Medical Orderly

CROWDED, CRAMPED, utterly weary, and uncomfortable as they were while the long convoy raced on, there was still spirit enough in the men to crack a joke, and to wonder profanely how Jerry was liking the carefully prepared traps set for him. Athens was reached once more, its streets dark and deserted, then on and on interminably. All lights went out. Not even a cigarette glowed.

Some time after midnight we became suddenly aware that something was amiss. The convoy stopped. Behind us a heavy truck pulled up with its fender touching our tailboard. Behind that again we knew, though we could not see, there were more trucks "nose to tail" almost endlessly. Plainly we could hear above the sound of brakes and idling engines the mutter of gruff voices inquiring, speculating, cursing the delay.

After a stop, which seemed endless, the vehicle ahead melted into the darkness. We were moving, but at a snail's pace, in fits and starts, a few yards at a time. Then trucks began to roar past us, going back the way we had come. Ahead, with infinite trouble in the narrow roadway, the transport was turning about. Someone complained bitterly "Another b—— muck-up!"

Shortly before dawn the convoy halted and dispersed among olive groves. It was Sunday, and Greek civilians were early astir. They came to stare curiously at us, strolling couples, little groups of family folk out perhaps on their way to Mass. I set to work at once to dig in, as did all the others, in the shade of a convenient tree.

A little old workman touched me on the shoulder. "Why do you do that?" he asked. "You will kill the tree. The Germans, they will not come here. They could not." It wasn't possible to desecrate such peace, such beauty. And

looking at the green loveliness of the richly fertile gardens about us it did not seem possible to me either. This was no battlefield. The crops, the strolling peasant people in their ones and twos and their family groups, the smell of fresh turned earth, all spoke of peace. But I dug my trench.

From the time I dropped asleep lying full length in a narrow grave-like hole with little streams of soil trickling in on me until there was a sudden stir and a barking of orders about midday seemed only a moment. "Moving out at once," snapped an N.C.O. "You've got to march to a beach and wait till dark." Orders were given to destroy the vehicles. Men were smashing gear with picks and heavy hammers.

So this was the last stage. The end of the campaign in Greece. It was a relief at least to know, but why must we move in broad daylight? As the first long files of men began to march away the story was passed from man to man that the enemy was entering Athens. We were in danger of being cut off, and must at all costs make contact with an embarkation point.

No sooner had the men begun to move than the air was filled with the roar of engines, and out of the sky a long line of black shapes came diving, screaming, towards us. Messerschmitts! I thought of the old Greek peasant and his quiet conviction that the peace of his lovely countryside could not be broken. Above our heads was an inferno of noise with the deadly uproar of almost continuous machine-gun fire dominant above it all. The first attack broke into a series of many. The air seemed full of hostile craft. Every few moments would come a burst of firing.

Ahead of us, but out of sight, the Luftwaffe was still attacking when we moved off again, hurrying from cover to