Roald Dahl

and the Lost Campaign

Trevor Fisher

Following the successful filming of his book 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory', Roald Dahl has an international reputation as a children's writer. There is, however, a macabre dimension to his writing underlined by his successful TV series 'Tales of the Unexpected'. Dark episodes in Dahl's highly successful career touched his life with tragedy. This is clearly the case over his war experiences as a fighter ace in the darkest hours of World War Two.

In his early twenties, Dahl was an RAF fighter pilot in the Near East. He joined up late in 1939 at a time when British forces were fighting the Axis alone. After commissioning he was ordered to North Africa to fly against the Italians. Before he had a chance to fight, he crashed in the desert and was temporarily blinded. After a painful recovery he was retrained and sent to Greece. His first actual combat was in the Greek campaign which was a wholesale disaster. Though Dahl wrote about his experiences even his fame has not lifted the veil which has shrouded British intervention in Greece and which deserves to be lifted.

In the period following the Dunkirk evacuation, the British took comfort from successes against the Italians in North Africa. But victories in the desert could not compensate for expulsion from the European continent or counteract the disasters in Norway and France. When Mussolini decided to invade Greece through Albania in October 1940, this seemed to Churchill's government an opportunity to take the fight against the Axis back on to European soil.

The decision was at least in part designed to bolster confidence that Britain had the ability to fight alone against the Axis. Alas, the Greek experience was as negative as the previous campaigns. Consequently historians have tended to regard the Greek Campaign as nothing more than a blind alley. A J P Taylor, in the *Oxford History of England*, for example, argues the campaign was launched "on political and sentimental grounds," not military ones, devoting only a paragraph to its genesis and development.

Yet to the men who fought in Greece the disaster was something more than a side show best forgotten. Despite realising the campaign was doomed, they fought with courage, skill and determination. Even before the British actually engaged the Germans, it was abundantly clear to men in the front line like Dahl that the Greek expedition was destined to be a lost cause. This did not shake their resolve.

Dahl's introduction to Greece

Dahl had volunteered for the RAF in November 1939, training to fly Gladiators. On being commissioned on 5 October 1940, Dahl was posted to 80 Squadron, then on the Libyan-Egyptian border. His first attempt to join his

Roald Dahl in RAF uniform, 1941.
Images reproduced courtesy of RDNL

squadron ended in disaster. Given the wrong location, he ran out of fuel and crashed with such force that his face was smashed and he was temporarily blinded. Luckily he was picked up by soldiers from a British regiment and taken back to Alexandria where he was given the best surgery available, and patched up ready for battle.

Dahl was fit to fly again by March 1941. The Italian offensive in North Africa had been blunted and the British felt they could open second front in Greece after the Italian invasion of October 1940. The Uptton cartoon in *The Daily Sketch* underlined the British belief in sea power and, while British aid was initially confined to outdated aircraft, by the time Dahl joined the conflict the decision had been made to send a major force of troops and more modern aircraft to counter the threat of a German invasion. Events were to prove that sea power was not enough against a superb modern army.

Dahl was ordered to retrain on Hurricanes and rejoin his squadron in Greece. It was at this point that Dahl began to grasp the inadequacy of British preparations to fight in the Balkans. He was allowed only two days to train on the new plane and, after a little over seven hours practice, without any preparation on combat tactics for an aircraft much more complex than any he had flown before, he was sent to what he quickly realised was a military disaster.

The situation in Greece

The Italian invasion of Greece the previous October had triggered British support for the Greeks. Churchill promised their leader Metaxos that "We will fight in a common cause and share a common victory", but this was little more than bombast. Britain was struggling to maintain an army in North Africa after the disasterous losses of equipment incurred during the Dunkirk evacuation, and initially the Greeks did not want British military support for fear of provoking a German invasion.

Metaxos knew that the Germans, then taking over the crucial oil rich state of Rumania to the north, had the most formidable army in Europe. The Greeks only wanted to fight Mussolini and needed air support to bolster their forces on the Albanian front. The British sent Blenheim bombers and Gladiator bi-planes. These elderly machines, flown by gifted and determined pilots, did sterling service in the grim Balkans winter of 1940-41.

However, when Metaxos died suddenly a new and inexperienced Greek government called for military aid. The British over-confidence in naval power led them to believe they could maintain an expeditionary force in the peninsula against the Germans, and 60,000 troops were earmarked for Greece. They were totally outmatched when Hitler diverted a force ten times the size of the British forces to prevent the British gaining a foothold in the Balkans. Once the Germans attacked Yugoslavia on 6 April the British were setting a very puny David to fight a very large Goliath.

When Dahl arrived in Greece, British troops were already retreating. The British airforce in Greece, some 200 planes, had achieved great success against the poor quality Italian airforce. But the strain on the outdated planes had been considerable and when the German attack began, only 80 were serviceable. Dahl thought a large number of modern planes were to be sent to bolster the handful of Hurricanes already in Greece. He was mistaken. He was the sole reinforcement.

When he landed at Eleusis airfield near Athens, he was confronted by an unpleasant reality. Already suffering physically—at six feet six inches tall, Dahl contracted severe cramp if strapped into his plane for any length of time —ground staff added mental discomfort. They told him that the Germans had 1000 modern planes in Greece, while the RAF had only 80 planes that could fly. Greece was a disaster in the making to rival those of 1940, but Dahl later noted that:

> *it was not receiving the publicity that Dunkirk had received because it was a military bloomer best covered up.*

The failure in Norway had toppled Chamberlain's government. Dunkirk had gone down in history as a heroic retreat. But Greece was a disaster best ignored.

Curiously Dahl was unfazed, being young enough not to feel fear, though he calculated the odds against his surviving were 50 to 1. Dahl found his Commanding Officer impossible to talk to, saying that the man was overwhelmed by the task before him, but he related easily to David Coke, a pilot officer with whom Dahl shared a tent. When Coke discovered that Dahl had no combat experience, he was horrified. Dahl was equally horrified when he was told that there would be no chance to learn by flying with an experienced pilot: he would be thrown into combat the next day, alone, to sink or swim.

Sink or swim

Coke had been born as an aristocrat, being the second son of the Earl of Leicester, but his experiences in the Battle of Britain had made him a veteran. Coke took Dahl under his wing, outlining the differences between the Battle of Britain and flying in Greece. Over Kent, the RAF had had radar and efficient radio telephone. The Commanding Officer flew with his pilots and new men were paired with experienced flyers. None of this applied in Greece. There were no radio communications with the ground. A pilot had to fight his way out of trouble alone and, against the Junkers 88 bomber, the RAF was at a distinct disadvantage. The Germans were using tracer shells so they could see where they were aiming. The Hurricanes fired bullets and, if these did not get an engine instantly, the attack had failed. When attacking a Ju88 the attack had to be made from well below or the Hurricane would be exposed to devastating fire. Coke outlined a survival strategy.

Despite Coke's good advice, when Dahl made his first attack two days later he forgot not merely what Coke had told him, but the elementary rule that attacks were made out of the sun. In the excitement of his first attack, Dahl went straight for six Ju88s in line, at the same height and with the sun in his eyes. All six bombers were formed up in line abreast, allowing the six German gunners to aim at Dahl simultaneously. Only the fact that flying into a gap in the mountains forced the German pilots to go back into line saved Dahl from being subject to a lethal hail of bullets. By good luck Dahl hit one of the engines of the bomber bringing up the rear, downing the plane and forcing the aircrew to bail out, but he knew he had a miraculous survival.

The following day German fighters arrived to defend the bombers and the odds against him and his colleagues became astronomical. After attacking a second Ju88 he was chased by 30 or 40 Messerschmitt 109 fighters and only escaped by flying below tree top height thus daring the enemy to risk crashing into local buildings. The Germans pulled out, knowing they were within striking distance of the Greek airfields and need take no risks. The next couple of days were a blur in Dahl's memory as the German Blitzkrieg swept south towards Athens. *The Times* Correspondent reported on the 19 April

> *For two days I have been bombed, machine gunned and shot at by all and sundry. Stukas have blown two cars from under me and strafed a third…. The Germans are using a fantastic amount of aircraft, more than I saw in Norway under similar conditions of terrain. Goering must have a third of*

his air force operating here, and it is bombing every nook and cranny…

The bombing onslaught was relentless and the RAF was overwhelmed. Significantly, Dahl's log book for the Greek campaign is incomplete. Although a pilot had to keep the details up to date or face disciplinary action, for the Greek campaign the aircraft numbers are missing, indicating that the log book was filled in later by which time Dahl had forgotten which planes he had flown. In Greece, nothing mattered but fighting and surviving.

By 20 April as the Germans stormed towards the Greek capital, the situation demanded an attempt to bolster Greek morale. The British rallied the forces still left to them, merging the remnants of 33 and 80 Squadrons to bring every Hurricane in Greece to bear under the command of the legendary squadron leader Thomas 'Pat' Pattle, but this totalled less than 20 planes. No one could doubt either the futility of the exercise or the courage of the men who carried it out. Pattle's skill was legendary: but he was leading sadly inadequate forces.

The conflict on 20 April became known as the Battle of Athens, and it stood out in Dahl's mind when his other memories blurred. The previous three days he had flown eight missions, and the squadron had lost 3 planes and their pilots, but while these missions were a blur, the four missions he flew that day were different with the first being "a sheet of flame in my memory". The tiny group of fighters flew over Athens in formation led by Pat Pattle. They reached 9,000 feet when they were attacked by some 200 German ME109 and 110s. The formation broke into dozens of individual dog fights in which only the sheer number of German planes saved the British from annihilation as the Germans got in each other's way. Dahl's plane was hit and he lost his rudder, but was able to limp home along with David Coke. But five Hurricanes were destroyed and their pilots killed, including Pat Pattle.

There was no respite. As Coke and Dahl stripped naked and washed in cold water, a flight of Messerschmitt 109s strafed the airfield and only a lucky shot from a Bofors gun hitting one of the attackers drove them away. While the remaining Hurricanes managed to get airborne to relative safety, that night the squadron had to evacuate to an emergency airfield on the coast. The pilots argued they should clear out of Greece altogether and head for Crete where the German fighters could not reach them: but, despite the likelihood of annihilation, they were ordered to give cover to the Army to allow evacuation by the Navy. The consensus among the pilots was that they were being sacrificed so that the propaganda machine could argue that the gallant RAF "fought to the last pilot and the last plane".

The situation was surreal. While the commander in charge of the RAF in Greece, Marshall d'Albiac, arrived to order them to another airfield 50 miles away at Argos, an ME 110 scouted the camp and called up fighters to strafe the airfield. Five of the Hurricanes managed to get airborne before the Messerschmitts attacked to destroy the rest. They then fruitlessly looked for the army they were supposed to be covering, not realising the evacuation was further down the coast. The Germans had got this message, and were bombing with systematic fury but 80 Squadron did not see a German all day. That night Dahl and Coke discussed their chances of surviving and calculated they were nil.

Evacuation and disaster

The authorities now accepted the situation was hopeless. That evening the five most senior pilots were deputed to fly the surviving five Hurricanes to Crete. All the remaining pilots—and around a dozen fliers who had arrived from other parts of Greece—were to be flown out to the Western Desert. To Dahl's relief he escaped to Egypt without further trouble. When they arrived, the surviving pilots hitched a ride in a truck going to Alexandria, and for Roald Dahl the Greek episode was over.

It was not over for the Army and the Navy or the remnants of 80 Squadron left in Greece and Crete. The five remaining Hurricanes became involved in the battle for the island of Crete, whose loss was the final catastrophe for the British in the Balkans. The strategically vital island had been garrisoned when the Italians had invaded Greece, and with the resources wasted on Greece could have been held. Instead, it was lost to an airborne German force. Dahl knew of only one pilot from 80 Squadron who survived, Bill Vale. The others, who Dahl had hardly come to know to any real extent, simply vanished from sight.

Dahl understood from the start that the Greek mission was doomed. Few could have thought otherwise. The initial response of the British had been justified caution, with Winston Churchill appreciating the dangers. At a dinner party in December 1940 he had talked to his guests of a mythical future history which "denounced the criminal gambler who sent the divisions which might have turned the scale against the German invasion at home, or… sent to Greece the aeroplanes which could have turned the North African campaign into a success". However, he left the final decisions to men who had been to the scene and could make judgements at first hand. It was these men who threw Dahl and his companions into the fray.

Chief among these were Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, and Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Both visited the Middle East and Eden travelled to Greece to meet the leading politicians before backing the expedition. The Chiefs of Staff in the Eastern Meditteranean had been sceptical initially, but their doubts were overcome in part because of the success of Operation Compass in January 1941 in rolling back the Italians in North Africa. Alas the plight of the Italians only impelled Hitler to send Rommel, who arrived to set up the Afrika Korps in February. Greece became a side show.

The British forces landed in Greece were too few and the battle plan too ill-conceived and badly co-ordinated to have any chance against the Germans. The Germans had been planning their attack for months, and launched massive air forces against Yugoslavia and Greece, followed in classic Blitzkrieg fashion by overwhelming land attack. The air offensive was sustained and supremely effective while the British had inadequate forces to counter it. The RAF could muster only 80 serviceable planes to cover the whole of Greece, but calculated that in the Balkans overall the Luftwaffe had 800 planes, with the Italians 310. In fact the Germans had over 1250.

Even as Dahl arrived in Greece, the retreat had begun. The 17th Australian Brigade was the last to arrive, but on 16 April Wavell cancelled the orders for the Australian 7th Division and the Polish division to go to Greece,

The failure in Norway had toppled Chamberlain's government. Dunkirk had gone down in history as a heroic retreat. But Greece was a disaster best ignored.

recognising they were needed to fight Rommel's offensive in North Africa. On 17 April a working party from the Joint Planning Staff in Cairo began planning the evacuation. And on 18 April the new Greek Prime Minister Koryzis committed suicide. On the 19 April Wavell went to Athens to find his commanders calculating that perhaps only 30 per cent of the British force could be saved. In the event, the British managed to save 50,000 of the 62,500 combatants who had eventually arrived in Greece. 200 aircraft were lost plus two warships. Worse, the strategically vital island of Crete was now vulnerable and was subsequently lost.

Dahl and his fellow flyers knew little of the precise odds against them but knew their chances were derisory. The 'Official History' laconically sums up the situation at the Battle of Athens by saying: "On 20th April a large number of bombers and fighters attacked the Athens airfields. Greatly outnumbered, the 15 remaining Hurricanes went up to intercept. Five were shot down and most of the others damaged, as against the Germans' recorded loss of eight destroyed and two damaged. After this gallant fight very few Hurricanes were fit to fly, and the German airforce could do very much as it liked".

Dahl's memory gave him a somewhat more romantic view, arguing that the observers on the ground saw five Hurricanes shot down but they also "saw twenty two Messerschmitts shot down during the battle, though none of us ever knew who got what". Alas the real total of Germans shot down was much less, despite the skill and gallantry of the RAF pilots. But while Roald Dahl overestimated the success of his fellow pilots, he had no illusions about the folly of the expedition. He wrote objectively about his experiences in his autobiography, making no attempt to romanticise the Greek intervention.

Lessons unlearnt

Astonishingly, Churchill's government did not learn from the debacle. Two years later, after the victory at El Alamein in 1942 had shown the British could in fact defeat German troops, Churchill ordered another attack in the Eastern Meditteranean after the Italian surrender of 1943 to capture Leros and the islands of the Dodecanese. The RAF and Navy were again overstretched, and defeat left most of the Aegean under German control. Lessons had not been learnt and Churchill persisted in the face of American opposition. Where Greek was spoken, Churchill was fatally attracted.

Greece was a bitter lesson for the British that command of the seas and efficient military expertise did not guarantee successful military intervention against Germany on land. Command of the air was now essential. And for the decision makers concerned, primarily Anthony Eden the Foreign Secretary, it should have revealed the pitfalls of military intervention in the Eastern Meditteranean. Fifteen years later, in the Suez crisis, Eden as Prime Minister would show that he had learned nothing from the attempt to override geo-political reality with force. For Eden, command of the seas was sufficient in itself to allow military intervention. It was as though Greece 1941 had never happened.

After Greece, Dahl and Coke fought in Syria against the Vichy French, with Dahl suffering recurrent problems with his head injuries which led to him being invalided out of the RAF. He was appointed Air Attache in Washington and there discovered his talent as an author. He derived inspiration initially from his war experiences, writing a series of short stories which were published in 1946 under the title *Over to You*. Two were based on the Greek Campaign, one of which, the story *Katrina*, is clearly autobiographical.

Katrina is the story of a Greek child who is orphaned after a German bombing raid flattened her village. She is adopted by Dahl's squadron and displays an aggressive but impotent hatred of the German invader which is clearly symbolic of Greece as a whole. There is no happy ending. Dahl never wrote about his Greek experiences again till the second volume of his autobiography. The war was in the past, and in his subconscious.

Dahl never doubted the rightness of the cause for which he fought and, though he was clearly aware that over Greece someone had blundered, he did not analyse the reasons why. Like the Light Brigade at Balaclava, duty dictated obedience to orders, and Dahl carried them out without question or recrimination.

Historians can take a wider view. The Greek Campaign was folly, born out of illusions about sea power and the ability of the British and Commonwealth forces to fight alone. The Greek intervention was a chapter in the decline of the British Empire. It was a tragedy in its own right. For both reasons, it deserves to be remembered.

Bibliography

Roald Dahl, *Going Solo*, Puffin 2001.
Roald Dahl, *Logbook*, kept in the Dahl Museum in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire.
Roald Dahl, *Over to You*, Penguin 1973.
The Meditteranean and the Middle East Vol II, Major General I S O Playfair with others, HMSO 1956.
John Terraine *The Right of the Line The RAF in the European War 1939-45* Hodder & Stoughton 1985.
Christopher Shores and Brian Cull, with Nicola Malizia, *Air War for Yugoslavia, Greece and Crete, 1940-41*. Grub Street 1987.
T H Wisdom, *Wings Over Olympus*, The story of the RAF in Libya and Greece, George Allen and Unwin 1942.
Charles Cruikshank, *Greece 1940-41*, Davis Poynter 1976.
Winston Churchill, *The Second World War Vol II Their Finest Hour*, Cassell 1949.
E C R, Baker, A*ce of Aces*, M St John Pattle, Crecy, 1992.
A J P Taylor *English History 1914-1945,* Oxford University Press 1965.

Special thanks for help from Liz Williams at the Roald Dahl museum in Great Missenden, and Graham Laurie, ex RAF, with Dahl's log book.

Trevor Fisher is a writer, biographer and lecturer on literary and social figures and topics in modern British history. His most recent book *Oscar and Bosie, a Fatal Passion* (Sutton 2002). He has also written on Victorian scandals, Prostitution in the Victorian era. He is currently researching the cult of celebrity with reference to Oscar Wilde and Audrey Hepburn.