

# AUSTRALIANS AT THE BATTLE OF THERMOPYLAE 1941



German soldiers at Thermopylae after the Allied retreat

The  **Battle of Thermopylae** during [World War II](#) occurred in 1941 following the retreat from the Olympus and Servia passes. [British Commonwealth](#) forces began to set up defensive position at the pass at [Thermopylae](#), famous for the [Battle of Thermopylae](#) in 480BC, when 300 Spartans and 700 Thespians under the command of King [Leonidas](#) fought to the death against a gigantic [Persian](#) army. [General Bernard Freyberg](#) was given the task of defending the coastal pass with [Mackay](#) defending the village of [Brallos](#).

In the New Zealand sector, the 5th Brigade was deployed along the coastal road, the foothills south of [Lamia](#), and the [Spercheios River](#). The 4th Brigade was on the right where it had established coast-watching patrols, and the 6th was in reserve. In the Australian sector, the 19th Brigade, comprising the [2/4th](#) and [2/8th Battalions](#), defended Brallos. On 19 April, the [2/1st](#) and [2/5th](#) Battalions were placed under the command of Maj Gen [George Vasey](#), and that day and during the early hours of the next, [2/11th Battalion](#) rejoined the brigade.

Generals Freyberg and Mackay had been informing their subordinates that there would be no more withdrawals, both unaware of the higher level discussions on the evacuation. After the battle, Mackay was quoted as saying.<sup>[1]</sup>

**“I thought that we'd hang on for about a fortnight and be beaten by weight of numbers<sup>[1]</sup>”**

When the order to retreat was received on the morning of the 23rd, it was decided that each of the two positions was to be held by one brigade each. These brigades, the Australian 19th and 6th New Zealand were to hold the passes as long as possible, allowing the other units to withdraw. General Vasey, commander of the 19th Brigade said:

**“Here we bloody well are and here we bloody well stay<sup>[1]</sup>”**

This was interpreted by his brigade major as the *“Brigade will hold its present defensive positions come what may”*.<sup>[1]</sup> The Germans attacked on 24 April, met fierce resistance, lost 15 tanks and sustained considerable casualties. The Australians and New Zealanders held out the entire day.

With the delaying action accomplished, they retreated in the direction of the evacuation beaches and set up another rearguard at [Thebes](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

**Date** 24–25 April 1941.      **Location** Thermopylae, Greece.      **Result** German victory

**Belligerents.**  New Zealand       Australia       Germany

**Commanders.**       Bernard Freyberg       George Vasey       Ferdinand Schorner

**Casualties and losses** about 100 killed and wounded

## References

Official Histories – Second World War Australia in the War of 1939–1945. Series 1 – Army Volume II – Greece, Crete and Syria (1st edition, 1953) accessed 13 October 2006.

Bailey, p. 33.      **Battle**      **of**      **Greece**

J.E. Brooks wrote a poem about this battle entitled "Thermopylae 1941".

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