

## **Elaia (Kalpaki) - Kalama battle**

Following the occupation of Albania in April 1939, Italy put into action its spectacular plan against Greece, which initially specified the sudden occupation of Epirus and Corfu, with the second phase being the occupation of Western Macedonia. The Greek side did not remain static following the successive provocations by the Italians and the events that rocked the whole of Europe. The first defensive plan of the Greeks –which took into account the threat of Italy- was drawn up in 1939 (Plan L), which foresaw conceding a part of Epirus up to Arachthos, and defending the Arachthos - Zygos Metsovo sector. Later, when the defensive preparations were continuing at a satisfactory rate, a second plan was drawn up (Plan La), which foresaw defending the advanced border line Kalama-Elaia (Kalpaki)-Gamila-Smolika-Stavros (Grammos), without significant land concessions. The Italian plan included a sudden invasion with flying columns before the completion of the mobilisation and assembling of the Hellenic Army.

The main burden of the defensive organization of Greece was thus born by the Epirus Front and the VIIIth Ioannina Division. Acting on the initiative of its commander, Major General Haralambos Katsimitrou, it was decided to concentrate all the preparatory actions in the Elaia (Kalpaki) region, the control of which would secure not only Epirus, but also the passageways to Thessaly and Macedonia. This site had been organised since the middle of 1939, and was at a satisfactory level, especially along the heights along both sides of the compulsory crossing of the Kalama River. Thus, on 27th October 1940, just one day before war was declared, the VIIIth Division had completed its mobilisation phase and its Commander had assured HAGS HQ that “No Italians will cross the Kalpaki”.

The VIIIth Division had been strengthened by the Headquarters of the IIIrd Infantry Brigade and a few Infantry and Artillery units. Its forces included 4 Infantry Regiment Commands, 15 Infantry Battalions, 5 Artillery Batteries, 5 Infantry Guard Squads, 2 mobile Machinegun Battalions and a Divisional Reconnaissance Group. The Italian Army had superior forces with respect to tanks and air support (around 400 planes). The following Italian forces were in Epirus: The XXVth Army Corp with 4 Divisions: 23rd “Ferrara” Infantry Division, 131st “Centaur” Mechanised Division, 51st “Sienna” Division and the Cavalry Division (21 Infantry Battalions, 1 Versaglieri Battalion, 41 Artillery Batteries, 2 Mortar Battalions, 3 Cavalry Regiments, 1 Squadron, 90 battle-tanks – a total force of around 41,200 men).

Italian forces began to move throughout the Epirus Line even before the expiration of the deadline on 28th October 1940. The Hellenic screening units initially resisted but then withdrew back to the Kalpaki region in accordance with the plans of the VIIIth Division, which had sited its HQ there. Up to 1st November the Italians limited their actions to land and aerial reconnaissance sorties, while their Artillery Batteries and Air Force acted against Grabala heights, Kalpaki and Assonisa, but with insignificant results. A more organized offensive began on the morning of 2nd November. Italian aircraft began the systematic bombing of Grabala, Kalpaki, Vellas Monastery, Ioannina airport and Mazaraki bridge, but again without any significant results. This was followed at midday by heavy shelling by the Italian Artillery, but

despite the fact that over 2,000 shells were fired and the heights were literally re-excavated, losses were again minor thanks to the effective preparations of the Hellenic forces.

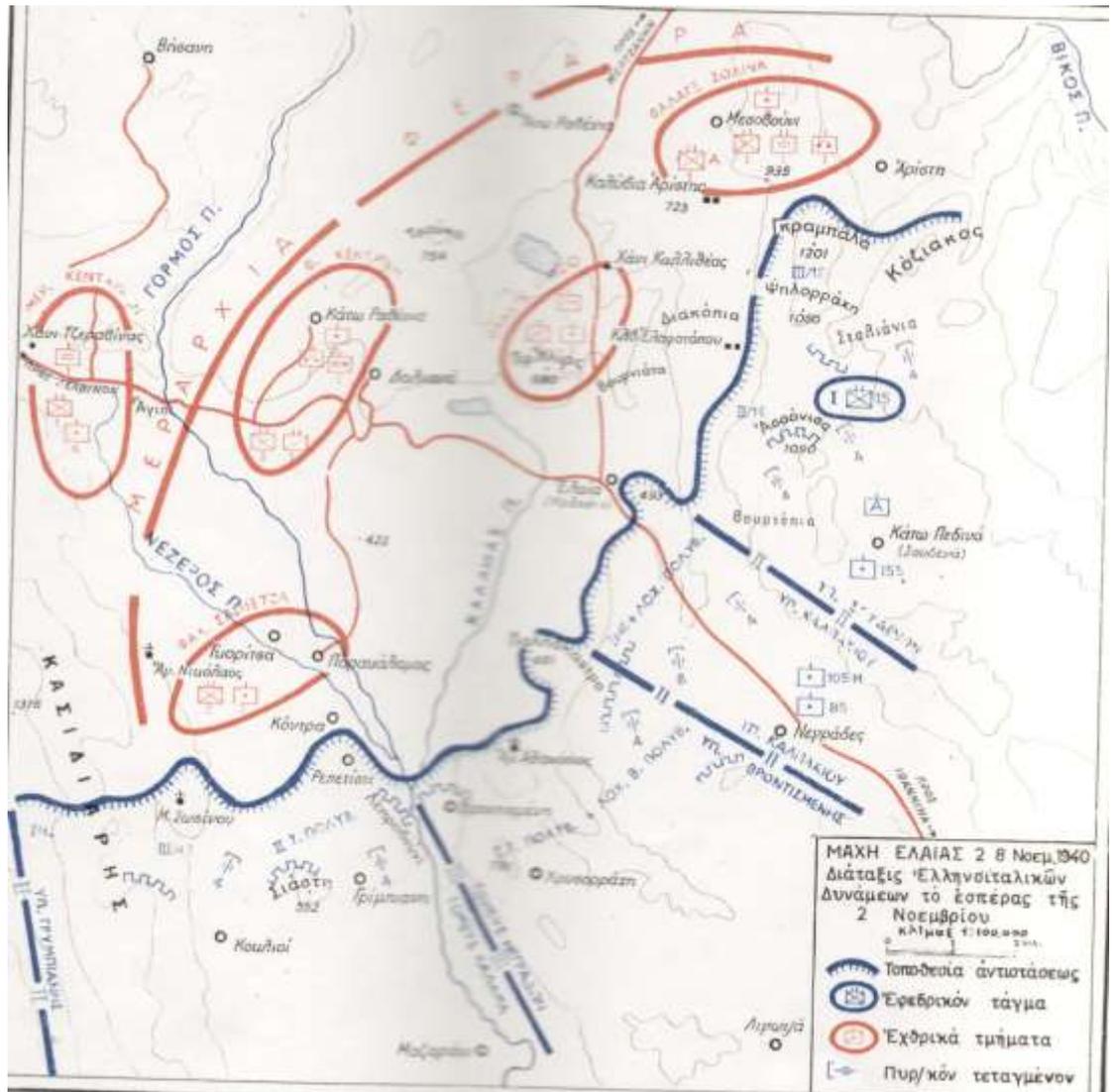
The same results were achieved from the offenses launched by the two Italian Divisions ("Ferrara" and "Centaur") that moved against Grabala heights and Psilorrachi, and the Italian forces suffered significant casualties thanks to successful shelling by the Greek Artillery units. Despite this, that same night an Albanian Battalion and select Italian units launched a surprise attack and occupied Grabala heights, overrunning the Company from the 15th Regiment that was stationed there. The fierce snowstorm that followed suspended all further actions by both sides, but at dawn on 3rd November Hellenic forces retook the heights. The Italians left behind at Grabala 20 dead, 6 prisoners and large quantities of guns and ammunition.

The two sides exchanged artillery fire throughout the day and the Italian Air Force bombed Kalpaki and Soudena. In the afternoon the Italians launched a new attack against Grabala heights, Psilorrachi and Assonisa. Around 70-80 tanks from the "Centaur" Division, supported by 50 or so motorcyclists, reached to within 500-600 m of Kalpaki. But this attack was also repulsed by Hellenic Artillery shelling and anti-tank defensive sites (ditches and minefields). Many Italian tanks were destroyed while the remaining tanks that withdrew were seriously damaged. Hellenic losses amounted to 35 dead and wounded officers and soldiers.

These failures suffered by the enemy raised the morale of the Greeks, who had managed to effectively deal with the two factors where the Italians predominated: battle-tanks (which were seen for the first time in action) and the Air Force. Following successive failures, the Italians were forced to suspend the full offensive drive that they were planning and limit themselves to artillery fire and aerial bombardments, especially against Grabala.

On the morning of 5th November, the Italians bombed the areas of Grabala and Vrontismenis, but during the night the VIIIth Division had managed to withdraw from its positions without being observed by the enemy. At the same time, Italian tanks attempted to cross the Kalama River but did not succeed because they bogged down in the marshy ground. Sporadic firing was again carried out the following day, and on 7th November the Italians launched their final assault, attempting to by-pass the Kalpaki junction and head on towards Ioannina. Their planes bombed the same sites and their forces were able to temporarily occupy Grabala but it re-fell to Greek hands when units of the 15th Infantry Regiment crushed the select Italian force, which had metallic shields on their chests with the inscription "Soldiers of Death". The Italian losses amounted to 45 dead and 7 prisoners, while Hellenic forces suffered 1 officer killed and 1 wounded, and 11 dead and 33 wounded soldiers.

On 8th November all Italian offensive drives were suspended and General Praska, Commander of the Italian forces in Albania, was replaced by Sontou. The Italian forces began to withdraw defensively throughout the Front Line, leaving behind only a bridgehead south of the Kalama River.





**Figures:**

1. Diagram of the Elaia-Kalama Battle  
(AHD/HAGS, *The Hellenic Army During the Second World War. The Greco-Italian War 1940-1941, The Italian Invasion*, Athens 1960, Diagram 4).
2. Battle of the Kalama River – a populist image of that time  
(*History of the Hellenic Nation*, t. IE', Athens Publications, Athens ....., p 425).