

## United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans (UN-SCOB)

*Duration:* 21 October 1947 – 31 July 1951

*Number of military personnel:* 5

*Decorations:* none

*Fatalities:* none

### Background

Since its independence in 1929, Greece had been an economically weak and politically divided state, in which various factions vied for power. These divisions also obstructed the resistance against the German and Italian occupiers in the Second World War. Royalists, communists and republicans were not only fighting against the occupiers, but also against each other.

In 1944, fearing that the communists would achieve a political and military monopoly, Great Britain successfully backed a government of national unity. The communists thwarted the foundation of a national army, however, and subsequently left the government, but the ensuing communist coup met with failure.

The year 1945 was characterised by an increasing number of clashes between the national army, which had nonetheless been set up in the meantime, on one side and the communist guerrillas on the other, and in the course of 1946, the violence degenerated into a civil war. The communist neighbours to the north of Greece - Yugoslavia, Albania and Bulgaria – were giving increasing amounts of material, financial and logistic support to their ideological comrades. The Greek government complained about this to the United Nations Security Council on 3 December 1946. The left-wing regimes in the neighbouring countries were, according to the Greek government, guilty of interfering in Greece's domestic affairs by providing support for the guerrillas of the Greek communist resistance movement, EAM.

On 19 December 1946, the Security Council decided (in resolution 15) to send a Commission of Investigation, consisting of representatives from those states with seats in the Security Council. However, the Council proved unable to reach a decision as to the course that should be adopted with regard to the Greek issue and handed the matter over to the UN General Assembly.

### The mandate, the tasks and the organisation of UNSCOB

With resolution 109 (II) on 21 October 1947, the General Assembly established the United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans (UNSCOB). Nine of the eleven members of the Security Council, including the Netherlands, each provided two dele-

gates for UNSCOB. The Soviet Union and Poland declined to participate. The four nations involved were required by the resolution to seek a peaceful resolution to their differences. The General Assembly instructed UNSCOB to monitor progress and to provide support if requested. To this end, the commission appointed observer groups, but these were hampered from the outset because Greece's neighbours denied them access.

The delegates met in Thessaloniki and later in Athens and divided the work between two sub-commissions. The first, of which the Netherlands was a member, concentrated on the observer groups and on budgetary matters, while the second sub-commission concerned itself with political and administrative problems, as well as the problems surrounding the refugees and minority groups. The costs of the mission were paid by the participating nations. In practice, this meant that most of the expenditure was borne by the United States (US).

The commission posted the observers in seven patrol bases along the northern border of Greece: Ioannina, Kastoria, Florina, Kozani, Salonika, Kavalla and Alexandroupolis. These sites were used as operating bases for patrols which lasted for several days and which were conducted in vehicles, with pack animals or on foot, depending on the terrain. The observers were also able to make use of a number of patrol aircraft that had been supplied by the US. The conditions in which the observers worked were extremely primitive. Even at the patrol bases, food, water and other supplies were scarce and there was barely any heating. There were few roads, and the ones that existed were in such a poor state that travelling was a highly dangerous activity.

The objective of the patrols was to establish the amount of direct or indirect support coming from the communist neighbours to the north for their ideological comrades. The observers frequently moved up to the front line with Greek army units, which meant that they regularly came under fire. Another of the observers' tasks was to interrogate captured guerrilla fighters about the nature and scope of that support. The public announcement of the violation of Greek sovereignty was supposed to Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria to stop supporting the Greek communists. From February 1949, the observers were directed by a chief observer, the British brigadier general H.W.D. MacDonald.

Around and about that time the Greek army – supported materially and financially by the Americans – was able to gain the upperhand in the war. The communist rebels suffered heavy losses during a series of offensives. The gradual improvement in the security situation along the northern Greek border and the ever-increasing costs meant that the observer operation needed to be scaled down in 1950. The number of observers fell in phases from 41 to 36 in April 1950 and to 24 in June the same year. A further reduction in the number of observers to 15 was postponed for a year because of the outbreak of the Korean war. The commission had no wish to play into the hands of the communists now that attention had been diverted to the war in Korea. In Novem-

ber 1951, at Greece's request, the General Assembly decided to terminate the mission (resolution 508A (VI)).

### **Dutch participation in UNSCOB**

The Netherlands provided two delegates for the commission as of 21 October 1947; the diplomat J.M. de Booy (former navy officer and secretary for Shipping and Fishing, and the Navy) and Lieutenant Colonel RNLMC J.J.A. Keuchenius (ret.) as his deputy. De Booy thought that the Netherlands could not hold back on sending observers. In anticipation of the decision of the secretary for Foreign Affairs, C.G.W.H. van Boetzelaer van Oosterhout, De Booy made it clear what requirements the observers had to meet. An intimate knowledge of the French and English language was essential. Preferably the observer had mastered a Balkan-language. He should be under forty years of age and immune to hardships. Van Boetzelaer was willing to appoint observers, but refused to pay for them. He considered that to be the responsibility of the UN. The Netherlands representative with UNSCOB was told to convey that the Netherlands did not have any qualified personnel. De Booy adjusted the requirements for the observers at the end of February 1948. Knowledge of Balkan-languages was no longer necessary, as long as the observers were sporty and had a good sense of duty. The cabinet, however, decided not to send any observers. De Booy was not willing to throw in the towel and succeeded in convincing Van Boetzelaer to put the issue on the agenda of the cabinet again. On 19 April 1948 the Dutch government decided to assent to the sending of two observers.

The first two observers, Captain (military aviation) J. Nix and Lieutenant Colonel Baron I.L.D. Sirtema van Grovestins, arrived in Greece in June 1948. The latter returned to the Netherlands a year later. Nix was then joined by three more Dutch officers. The majority of the married observers had their families come over to Greece, as did two of the five Dutch officers. The wives and children moved in with their men at the various patrol bases. Because of the Netherlands' neutral position in the conflict, the Dutch observers often chaired the observer group.

The duties of the observers were not devoid of danger, which the following incident shows. It was for instance the observer group of Captain Nix that caught some guerrilla's red-handed trying to cross the Greek-Albanian border in the middle of the night. Near dawn the observers were shot at. Nix, despite the fact that the bullets whizzed passed his ears, remained in his position to see how the guerrilla's returned to Albania. A Greek liaison officer praised him to the skies in the *Herald* (a daily newspaper). "To the admiration of the Greek People and the Greek Army, I would like to add the admiration of myself, a humble lieutenant, who personally witnessed and admired the devotion to his duty of this excellent representative of the Dutch People. He will forever remain in the minds of the hardy and fearless Greek commando troops as an example."

In September 1948 De Booy returned to the Netherlands. The position of delegate remained vacant for a year. At the end of 1949 the Dutch ambassador P.C. Visser arrived to fill it. Keuchenius, who was acting delegate while the delegate was absent, had left some months earlier because of frustrations over the job benefits.

In April 1950 the number of Dutch observers decreased from four to three. They returned to the Netherlands in July 1951, which the Netherlands participation in this mission.

### **Bibliography**

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