Early in the morning of 12 April, after another night spent listening to German troop-carrying and armoured vehicles deploying to their front, Mackay’s men holding the line at Kleidi Pass received reports of German infantry massing in the vicinity of Vevi. Meanwhile, German artillery was seen through the gloom moving into position to the north, and tanks lumbered forward to probe between the 2/4th Australian Battalion and the Greeks to their left. The night had been icy and a blanket of snow lay over 30 centimetres deep. Incidents of Allied frostbite were growing. At first light an entire NZ machine-gun platoon reported itself unfit to handle its guns while men from the 2/8th Australian Battalion were being evacuated from the line with hypothermia. At the same time, the defenders knew they had only to hold for another thirty-six hours before they could retire south to the Olympus-Aliakmon Line. Although for the last two days they had endured significant probing, shelling and machine-gun fire, their line had still not been seriously threatened. It was clear from German preparations, however, that a significant attack was imminent. An anxious Mackay urged Brigadier Charrington to continue preparing the two allotted fallback positions at Sotir and Ptolemais. With the Germans poised to strike it was, for the defenders, a race against time.

The Germans, however, were not inclined to comply with Mackay’s withdrawal schedule—they were now ready to move against the Allied line. Orders were issued at dawn. The overall German plan was to deploy the available forces in the Vevi area into three ‘battle groups’. To the west the ‘Appel Group’ (from the 9th Armoured Division) was ordered to pass

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1 Perhaps the only positive outcome of the freezing conditions for both sides was the fact that injuries and wounds, even those that went untreated for 3-4 days covered only by dressings, tended to show very little sepsis: ‘5 Australian General Hospital Report of Events in Greece’, 9 June 1941, AWM 54, 403/7/17.

2 Letter, Wains to Wards, 26 April 1952, ANZ ADQZ 18902, WAI13/1/11; letter, Robert to Wards, ANZ ADQZ 18902, WAI13/1/11; I. Wards, New Zealand War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, ‘Campaign narrative of 2 New Zealand Division’, 1952, AWM 54, 534/2/26 [1]; ‘Greece – Comments on TSS’, from Gavin Long’s Extract Book No. 18, AWM 67 5/18; 1 Armoured Brigade Operation Order No. 5, 12 April 1941, AWM 54, 534/2/26 [1]; Long, Greece, Crete and Syria, p. 58.
between Mackay’s left flank and the 21st Greek Brigade, and on through Xinon Neron to Kozani. The centre ‘Witt Group’ was directed to advance south of Vevi village and on through the Kleidi Pass to Sotiri, to capture the road to Ptolemais and Kozani. On the eastern flank the ‘Weidenhaupt Group’ (based on the 3rd Battalion, Adolf Hitler Regiment) was ordered to move to Kelli village from the north, in front of the area occupied by the Greek Dodecanese Regiment, then on towards Amyndaion. The attacks by the Witt and Weidenhaupt Groups were scheduled to begin at 2.00 p.m., 12 April, after an hour’s ‘opportunity’ shelling rather than a traditional barrage. The obvious German main effort was with Witt Group, as the task of breaking the Kleidi Pass, and thus securing the most direct road route south, was of vital importance. After examining reconnaissance reports Witt decided that two high points, both within the area occupied by the 2/8th Australian Battalion, were themselves the key to the pass. He therefore ordered his 1st and 7th Companies to mount preliminary assaults on each feature before the main attack was launched. These preliminary operations initiated what has become known as the Battle of Vevi.

At 8.30 a.m., supported by intense mortar and machine-gun fire, Witt’s 1st Company advanced in close order to the east of the Vevi road against the boundary between the 2/8th Australian Battalion and the 1st Rangers. The German company attack was ferocious and determined in the face of considerable Allied shelling—two German platoon commanders and a number of section commanders soon fell as casualties. By 11.00 a.m., however, by grenade and bayonet, the attackers had forced out the left hand Australian companies, which retreated up the ridge, and captured their objective. Further advance by Witt’s 1st Company was only checked by the defenders by transferring troops from the right flank of the Australian battalion. The German company consolidated, made no further attack, and awaited the main Witt Group assault.