

Evzones: The historic Presidential Guard of Greece

The Evzones (Presidential Guard) have a history that stretches over more than a century. The Presidential Guard was founded on 12 December 1868 as a combatant and at the same time ceremonial force. Gradually its role became solely ceremonial, as can be seen by its changing names: the Palace Guard, the Flag Guard, the Guard of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Royal Guard and finally, since 1974 and the restoration of democracy in Greece, the Presidential Guard.

The barracks where the Presidential Guard is based has been in the same place since the force was founded. It is situated close to the present Presidential Mansion (formerly the Palace) on Herod Atticus Street and is called after the chieftain and hero of the 1821 Revolution against the Ottoman rule, George Zavellas.

Today the Presidential Guard has the following duties: The deployment of a guard of honour on a round-the-clock basis at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, at the Presidential Mansion and at the gate of the barracks;

the official raising and lowering of the flag on the Sacred Rock of the Acropolis; serving as guard of honour to the President of the Republic and to the leaders of foreign countries; and serving as guard of honour to the ambassadors of foreign countries while they present their credentials to the President of the Republic.

Evzones also accompany the Sacred Light on its journey from Jerusalem to Athens every Easter.

The Evzone uniform, as we know it today, was worn by men-at-arms (armatoloi) and klephts during the Turkish occupation of Greece (1453-1821), as may be seen in paintings from this period. The Evzone, with the "foustanella" (a kind of kilt) and the "tsarouhi" (rustic shoes with pompoms), became a symbol of the War of Independence. After the Revolution of 1821 the uniform of the Evzone was officially established as the uniform of all chieftains and fighters of the Revolution.

After the Second World War the Evzone Regiments were re-organised and formed into modern elite light infantry units as part of the modernization of the Hellenic Armed Forces.



The uniform of the Evzones has a long history, which begins with the warriors (evzones) at the time of Homer and culminates in the "foustanella" and "tsarouhi" at the time of the Turkish Occupation. From 1821 onwards the Evzone uniform was established as the official Greek national costume.

The making of the Evzone uniform is not a simple procedure. It requires knowledge and experience on the part of the makers, as well as a great deal of time and expense. The uniforms are completely hand-made. There are two types of uniform: that of the officer and that of the private and each has a summer and a winter version.

The main parts of the Evzone uniform are: the hat made of red baize with a silk tassel; the shirt, white with very wide sleeves; the waistcoat, hand embroidered with great skill. Various designs of great traditional and folklore importance are embroidered on the waistcoat in white or gilt thread; the foustanella, made from 30 metres of white material, with 400 pleats, representing the 400 years of the Turkish occupation; the breeches, the long red trousers of the officers and the white woollen stockings of the Evzones;



the cartridge belt and a M1 Garand semi-automatic battle rifle, with bayonet; the garters, black for the Evzones and blue for the officers; the gaiters, the red boots and the 1821 sabre of the officers; and the inside garter, which holds the stockings in position, the fringe (blue and white coloured braids, the colours of the Greek flag) and the "tsarouhia", the traditional shoes of the Evzones. The shoes are completely hand-made from hard red leather and each sole has 60 nails. Each pair weighs about three kilos. The toe of the shoe turns up in a point which is covered by a black pompom.

Apart from the Evzone uniform, the Presidential Guard also wears the Cretan uniform with its characteristic breeches and knife worn in the belt. The Cretan uniform is worn on certain official ceremonial occasions. In this way the Presidential Guard represents not only those who live on the mainland but also the islanders. Thus the Evzone uniform represents the warrior of the mainland, while the Cretan uniform represents the warrior of the Greek islands. Recently the traditional uniform of Pontos has also been added.

In 1925 Greece decided to build a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, an idea which had first been proposed and implemented by the French after the end of the First World War.

In 1926 a panhellenic competition was announced for a design for a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It was to be built in front of the main entrance of the Parliament building, facing Syntagma (Constitution) Square.

On 9 October 1926 the Ministry for the Military with ordinance number 219188 awarded the prize to the architect Emmanuel

Lazaridis. However the decision to erect the tomb in the afore-mentioned place was delayed as it met with many objections and differing opinions. A new committee was formed in June of 1928 and the Cabinet accepted its proposals. In April 1929 work began and the monument was completed on March of 1932. Its inauguration took place at the time of the National Holiday of the same year.

The Evzone unit provides a 24-hour honor guard, with an hourly guard change, at the Presidential Mansion and at Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in particular has become a tourist attraction, with many people marvelling at the guards, who stand motionless for two 20-minute intervals, during their 1 hour shifts. Every Sunday at 11:00 a ceremonial change of guards takes place. A parade of Evzones and a military band starts from the camp of the Evzones (just behind the Parliament Building) and through Vasilissis Sophias Avenue reaches the Tomb of the Unknown soldier where a ceremonial change of guards takes place. On this occasion all the three official uniforms of the Evzones can be seen.

Along the route from the Presidential Guard headquarters on Herod Atticus street, down Vasilissis Sophias avenue to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, one can see a white path on the pavement slabs formed by the tsarouchia of the Evzones, which symbolises the path to the national fights for independence. The Evzones never deviate from this path, no matter what obstacles they meet on their way.

The Evzones also never leave their post, for any reason.

A recent example of this was a bomb explosion targeting parliament. Despite a warning call that a home-made bomb was due to explode in a trash receptacle only a few feet away from a Presidential Guard sentry post at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Evzones refused to abandon their posts, and were later commended in person by President of the Republic Karolos Papoulias for their devotion and courage.