

# CONTINUING TO BECKON VISITORS: The island of Crete and the great Battle

*It was my first day at work in London, a Wednesday as I recall, when my Kombaro called. "Billy, come over to Crete, you won't regret it" By the Friday I had flown out to Crete to see what the fuss was all about...*

Crete can elicit different emotions for different people. To the Greeks, it's the symbol of uprisings and an indomitable spirit; to the Ottomans, a thorn in their side; to the Venetians, the jewel of their Mediterranean empire; and to the Germans, an almost impenetrable fortress.

To the Australians and the New Zealanders, it is a place of remembrance and camaraderie. As an Australian myself with a Greek background, I soon discovered what Crete means to a lot of people.

## Friday arrival

Upon arrival in Heraklion, I was greeted by an array of taxi drivers who mistook me for a Cypriot, probably due to my entrepreneurial 'good looks'. I shared a taxi with a foreign woman who spoke Greek but had little experience of the Cretan dialect. "Are you a foreigner?" she asked the driver who gave her a puzzled look. She continued, "Your Greek sounds broken." After swearing in his "broken Greek" the driver carefully explained that Crete is not Athens, "our life, the people and the culture is different here." Indeed, like most of Greece outside Athens, there is always a degree of difference. However, in Crete it is particularly noticeable.

I had always wanted to see Crete, and whilst Heraklion is not the place I would recommend to a first time visitor, it was my introduction to something I will never forget. There is a certain warmth in the people that greets the visitor in this city, which is near the Palace of Knossos and the mythical Minotaur. At the hotel, upon being asked what part of Cyprus I was from by the reception staff, I duly produced my Aussie passport and was met with a glowing response. "Ah, you are from Australia, why didn't you say so? We can offer you a discounted rate on your room." No doubt my imperfect Greek language ability also assisted in securing sympathy and the revised, non-tourist rates.

## Taking in the local sights

The next day I met up with my Kombaro (best man), George Manetakis, whose Father is from Crete. Within five minutes, not only had we finished a frappe and myself a tsigaro (cigarette), we had hired a car and made our way to the first beach full of beach bars that we could find.

As a ritual I normally visit the news stand to buy more tsigara and a newspaper. Something caught my eye that I had noticed in Heraklion. The shop was full of books on the Battle of Crete. Every-

where I seemed to turn they were selling books either by the famous author, Nikos Kazantzakis, or this important battle.

At the counter I was once again asked about Cyprus, to which I once again replied I was from Australia. The man at the counter beamed in pride as he mumbled something about the Battle of Crete. It seemed as though I was struggling to understand his Greek, and as George was just about to interpret, it dawned on me that almost 70 years ago, Australians along with other British Dominion troops and Greek soldiers fought the Germans in a landmark battle, a battle which nearly turned the course of the war.

## Changing the course of history

The Battle of Crete and the battle for Greece which began with Mussolini's defeat by Greek forces in late 1940 arguably changed the course of the war, and confounded Allied war strategists who had all but given up



on Greece. Indeed, the actions of the Greeks led Winston Churchill to declare to the UK Parliament: "Greeks do not fight like heroes, heroes fight like Greeks", in reference to the fact that Hellenic forces held out the Italians and Germans over the colder months of 1940-1941. Whilst most of continental Europe was occupied by the Nazis, the Greek forces fought bravely despite being outnumbered and fighting with weapons from a bygone era. Hitler had to delay his Russian offensive to deal with the Greeks, and in the process gave precious time to Stalin to twist the fortunes of war to his advantage by preparing for battle during the following year's brutal winter months.

By May 1941, mainland Greece was overrun by the Germans, and they needed only two weeks to secure their stranglehold over Crete. The invasion, which was launched on May 20, however was no cakewalk; for the German casualties were far greater than the Allies. Incoming airborne paratroopers were gunned down by waiting Allies and the local population. The first day's battle was intense and German casualties so high, that Hitler became reluctant to use paratroopers to invade enemy territories thereafter. Had the Allied Commander, General Freyburg of New Zealand, launched a counter attack on day 2 of the battle, the Germans (according to histo-

rian Antony Beevor) would have been defeated. History tells us that poor leadership ensured that this did not happen and Crete would ultimately be lost, but not without the heroics of Allied troops and the local population.

## Australian forces

The Aussies were represented by the Australian 19th Brigade Group and the Artillery Battery unit. Almost 40 per cent of Australian troops that fought across Greece during 1940-1941 were either killed or taken prisoner. Prime Minister Robert Menzies had said that the fight in Greece and Crete "was a great risk in a good cause."

Throughout the Battle and the subsequent resistance, Cretans were ferocious in the defence of their island displaying a sense of patriotism that has always been the hallmark of Crete throughout their history. A case in point is their 21-year resistance against the Ottomans which ended in 1669 as well as resistance to Arab and Venetian invaders during medieval times.

The Australians and the Kiwis earned undying praise for their tenacity and courage. When the Royal Navy pulled out as many of the Allies from Crete as they could on May 30 and 31, hundreds of Australians were left behind, and in true ANZAC (Australian



and New Zealand Army Corps) spirit, took it upon themselves to form part of the resistance.

The Cretans, at risk of certain death from the Germans, would shelter and protect Australians fighting in the resistance. The bonds that were forged would never be broken.

My Kombaro knows this to be only too true. His next door neighbour in Sydney was an Australian veteran of the Battle of Crete. He, like many others, was stranded in Crete after the evacuation and was kept safe by the Cretans, who also ensured his safe passage off the island. George recanted to me the story of when his Father first met this grateful World War Two veteran: "Upon hearing of my Dad's Cretan roots, he told him: 'I owe my life to the people of Crete. If there is anything I can do for you, do not hesitate to ask.'"

It should be noted that over 25,000 people across Greece would go on to be exe-

cuted by the Nazis for helping or sheltering Allies during the German occupation.

Most Australians that fell during battle in Crete are buried in the British and Commonwealth War Cemetery at Suda Bay, on the northern coast of Crete. The memorial that stands in honour of the Australians is called Stavromeni. The Cemetery has received visits from thousands of Australians over the years and it is one battle that is commemorated in Crete, and by the Australian, New Zealand and British Embassies every year.

At one stage, during the Cretan occupation there were approximately 75,000 Nazis on the island. It is truly a testament to the inhabitants of Crete and the ANZACs who continued the fight against such overwhelming odds.

## Remembering Crete

Crete has a population of approximately 700,000 people, with a history that can be traced back to Minoan times from 2600 BC. It is the oldest Greek civilisation and the second largest Greek island after Cyprus.

The island has had many inspirational stories and people throughout its history. Some of the famous names include Ekeftherios Venizelos, King Minos, the philosopher Epimenides, Alexander's General Nearchus, Saint Eumene, Nana Mouskouri and El Greco – whose home I visited in Toledo, Spain. (I even had the dubious honour of being chased out of an El Greco inspired museum for taking unauthorised pictures.) And since 1941 you can add the heroes of the Battle of Crete, Australians and Greeks alike.

I continued my brief holiday in Crete, taking in the sights and the glorious coast line – the same scenic images that soldiers on both sides would have taken in during May 1941. I couldn't imagine that anyone would have ever wanted to bombard such an incredibly beautiful island. In times of war however, holiday delights are not on the agenda.

As for my Kombaro and me, as we drove along the Cretan coastline making the occasional stop to admire yet another idyllic seaside town, our thoughts could not but help turn to all the suffering that had been visited upon this tranquil place and friendly people. It was then that I realised, if all those who had fallen in war were alive today, their thoughts would probably not be brooding over such darker days in history. They would no doubt be sitting in a cafe ordering a frappe while enjoying another game of tavli with their friends, lazing on the beach, or just soaking up all the simple pleasures this island has to offer.

In salute to the Greeks and ANZACs, George and I downed raiki, glazed our eyes over the Sea of Crete, and with a renewed admiration for our ancestors we decided we would take our time here. That Cretan taxi driver was right: The culture is different here. George's next door neighbour knew it, and we were beginning to understand it as well.

**Billy Cotsis**