

# BATTLE OF CRETE SEVENTIETH ANNIVERSARY

Full Day Hansard Transcript (Legislative Council, 6 May 2011)

**The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS**

[11.28 a.m.]: I move:

That this House:

(a) notes that this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Crete, which began on 20 May 1941,

(b) remembers the courage of the Cretan people and the unity between Greek and Australian soldiers that was forged in the heat of the battle, and

(c) honours the sacrifices made by Greek and Australian soldiers in the World War II campaigns in Greece.

It is a great honour to speak on the allied campaign in Greece and the Battle of Crete in 1941. There were a number of battles. I am not a military historian but I have a passion for reading military history, particularly the involvement of Australia in various campaigns. When I became a member of Parliament one of the first pieces of correspondence I received was from Dr Marie Hill, an academic and published historian. She is a member of the joint committee for the Allied campaign in Greece and the Battle of Crete and is the author of a book. The joint committee is comprised of veterans, the RSL and members of the Australian-Greek community. For many decades, in particular, for the past 20 years they have held commemorative events each year on a shoestring budget to raise awareness about the campaign. We know that in any voluntary organisation everybody lends their support freely.

On the seventieth anniversary of the commemoration Dr Hill wrote also to many Federal parliamentarians. In her correspondence to me she wrote about a series of events held by the committee this year in order to raise further awareness in the community, including young people through schools and TAFE. I acknowledge that the former Government showed its support by providing a contribution towards the efforts of the joint committee for the seventieth anniversary commemoration. On 12 April the committee organised an exhibition at the Anzac Memorial which the Minister for Citizenship and Communities, Mr Victor Dominello, opened. I thank him for his

support. The joint committee has planned further events for the remainder of this year. Together with David Elliott, Federal member Robert McClelland and some other Federal members of Parliament I attended a wreath-laying ceremony on 30 April in Martin Place. I was inspired by the many organisations that were represented in Martin Place and by the number of young people who attended.

In 1941 the little nation of Greece was one of the last European countries that had not fallen under the boot of the fascists powers. By April 1941 the Germans turned their huge army onto Greece and it was Australians, together with other allies, who came to the defence of Greece. The Australian Army's 6th Division, comprising many men who came from New South Wales, stood shoulder to shoulder with the Greek people and fought against the Nazis. A battalion of troops from New South Wales engaged and held back the Germans in the Vevi Pass in northern Greece, falling back only when the British failed to hold the line to the right. A Brigadier from Hurstville, Arthur "Tubby" Allen, and his men held the line north of Thermopylae to allow the rest of the Allied forces to evacuate further south. It was never an even fight. The Allies faced superior forces, armour and artillery. On mainland Greece 320 Australians soldiers were killed while a further 2,030 were taken prisoner.

Aided by Greek civilians along the way, the Australian and Allied troops were evacuated to the island of Crete. The climax of this dramatic conflict was to unfold on Crete. The attention of all the great powers turned towards it. To capture the island of Crete the Germans undertook the world's first airborne invasion. The Germans had no idea what brave people they were descending upon. What awaited the Germans when they landed on Crete was not a quiet island inhabited by submissive people. Crete is a proud, vigorous and independently-spirited island. It is sometimes said that Crete is an independent island and does not belong to Greece. Against machine guns,

modern rifles and artillery, Cretan civilians rose up and bravely met the German invasion with knives and axes, or even their bare hands. In some areas, old rifles last fired against the Ottomans 100 years earlier were dug up from their hiding places and used to repel the invaders.

As Crete fell the Allied troops and the remnants of the Greek Army were evacuated to the Middle East. On Crete 274 Australian troops lost their lives and a further 3,102 were taken prisoner. However, a large number of Allied troops, including many Australian soldiers, remained on the island as they had no means of escape, and many evaded capture. Despite the real danger in providing help, it was the Cretan people who gave these stranded soldiers refuge, food and safety. The Germans ordered very harsh reprisals against the locals if they provided help to any remaining Allied troops. That did not stop many Cretan monasteries, such as Preveli, and numerous villages across the island becoming safe shelters and points from which Allied troops could escape. The Cretan people guarded and protected the Allied soldiers who were dispersed in hideouts which successfully hid many of them, even after repeated German searches. Those efforts are honoured and remembered in Australia by many veterans, to the extent that a whole town, Prevelly, in Western Australia, is named after the famous monastery in southern Crete.

Australian forces taken prisoner on the Greek mainland in the Battle of Crete represented 83 per cent of total Australian prisoners of war captured by Axis powers in World War II. It is a significant and important sacrifice that we honour and that we should always want to honour. The heroism and sacrifice of Australians in mainland Greece and on Crete was not something forgotten or considered lightly by Greek people. In the heat of wartime a bond of steel was forged between these two people. The relationships made between Greeks and Australians have endured and grown stronger. It is something more than just coincidence that when Greeks sought to leave the

poverty of war-torn Europe, Australia was the place to which they wanted to come. From the examples of Australian troops who fought by their side, Greeks knew that Australia was a place where people loved freedom—a place where courage was rewarded and mateship was real. On those foundations, those strong values, we have built the prosperity and harmony that is modern Australia.

I thank the joint committee for the commemoration of the Allied campaign in Greece and the Battle of Crete for their efforts throughout the years to ensure there is a proper remembrance of this significant historical event. We will encourage attendance at a number of these events throughout the year. We will ensure that the Battle of Crete is not forgotten and the sacrifices will be remembered. Lest we forget the heroism and sacrifices of our troops and all those who fought for freedom in the Allied campaigns in Greece and on Crete.

Pursuant to sessional orders business interrupted at 12 noon for questions.

**BATTLE OF CRETE**

**SEVENTIETH ANNIVERSARY**

Debate resumed from an earlier hour.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS [2.30 p.m.], in reply: Madam Deputy President, my congratulations on your election. I would like to commend the wonderful and insightful contributions that members made to the debate on this motion. The Hon. Charlie Lynn gave fascinating details of the Battle of Crete as well as some interesting anecdotes of the personalities involved. The Hon. Lynda Voltz added her personal perspective, for which I thank her. I thank the Hon. David Clarke for his very enthusiastic support of the motion. There are very interesting stories that need to be told and retold in order to ensure that the sacrifices of Australian troops and all those who fought for freedom with them are honoured and remembered. I commend the motion.

Question - That the motion be agreed to - put and resolved in the affirmative.

Motion agreed.

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**Time:** 7.00pm Doors Open

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