

The Battle of Crete

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Section 1: The Axis

Three dictators: two in Europe and one in Asia. They formed an alliance and called their alliance the Axis. The goal of the Axis was to conquer the world. The tool of conquest was to be the army. They began to prepare their armies. The time came to act, the year, 1939. The leader of this group and strongest of the three, the dictator from Germany, took the first step. His strategic plan was to invade quickly and subsequently occupy the countries/ territories of northern Europe. Being unprepared, these countries, their territories succumbed to his trained forces and fell under his control, one after the other. That same year, the second dictator of Italy, planned to occupy all the Mediterranean countries of southern Europe. He began his campaign with Albania which was subdued very easily and quickly. His immediate success gave him a false sense of impudence. His strategic plan to occupy Greece next in order to reach the Mediterranean Sea. In his mind, Greece too would be any easy conquest. He began his planned invasion by amassing all his forces at the border. That was indeed his first error. He had not taken the time to study the history of the country he was about to invade. A history of struggle for liberty that did not and would never end.

Section 2: The Italian Invasion

At 5:30 am, the morning of October 28, 1940, the Italian dictator's ambassador in Athens presented an ultimatum to the Greek prime minister, without warning or prior notice. The request was simple, the prime minister of Greece was told to surrender his country unconditionally and quickly to the power of the Axis. The prime minister was awakened to this request which at first, he thought was just a dream, certainly not reality. The gist of the message was unmistakable. Italy already at war with Greece's ally Great Britain was demanding the right to occupy various strategic points within Greece "for the duration of the war in the Mediterranean." The ultimatum accused Greece of allowing the

British Royal Navy to use her territorial waters and ports to attack Italy, as well as permitting the buildup of British secret forces on Greek islands. “These provocations,” the ultimatum declared, “can no longer be tolerated by Italy. The Italian government demands that the Hellenic government shall not pose any resistance to this occupation. Should the Italian forces meet with resistance, such resistance will be crushed by our forces at arms.” The bearer of the ultimatum waited for a response: yes or no. The leader of the small Greek nation did not need to think as to his response. He knew very well what his people would want him to say. And he answered an unequivocal “No”, “Ouchi” in Greek, knowing that his country was not prepared militarily and that his response would be indeed an act of suicide. He stood up and with the strength and resolve of Leonidas of Sparta said “No, come and take it!! Come and take our country, we will not hand it over to you now nor ever!!!!”

October 28th dawned. The armies of the dictator to the south that were waiting at the Albanian border entered Greece. And as they proceeded into Greece, Greeks of every age and gender in every village took whatever weapons they could find and attacked the invaders. Their homeland was in danger, and it lie in wait for her children to save her. All raced to the front and fought continuously through the days and nights to come. In two weeks’ time, by November 14th, the villagers had chased the invaders back into Albania. On October 28th, the day of the invasion, Mussolini met with Hitler in Florence bragging about his plan to invade Greece. “My Führer, today we declared war on Greece, and we will conquer this nation with no resistance quickly”. “Il Duce, you did well. Proceed with your plan for it will aid us as we move forward.” The dictator from the north could not have ever imagined that his ally from the south would fail. He waited for him to succeed, possibly with time. The barefoot villagers and troops, without both boots and shoes and only their united cry “Αέρα!” or “Aera” (meaning, a hurricane force wind) pushed those frightened soldiers of the dictator from the south into the snow-covered Albanian mountains. That cry, “Aera, boys” was the cry of the entire nation. It was a cry to sweep away the enemy with the strength of a hurricane wind. It gave the Greek soldiers the strength they needed as they advanced in the snow, pursuing the enemy and liberating villages and towns. The thrill of victory against overwhelming odds allowed the soldiers the ability to overcome the pain in their feet, brought on by frostbite induced by the snow and cold. This defense lasted for

months. The troops of this Axis ally were not advancing but retreating. The dictator from the north had lost his patience with the dictator and troops from the south. He began to feel contempt for his ally from the south. From October to April, seven months with no visible progress. The delay was a major setback for the Axis alliance. Hitler realized he alone must conquer all of Europe.

Section 3: The German Invasion

On April 6, 1941, armored German troops invaded Greece through Bulgaria. They broke through the Greek defenses at the Bulgarian border. Most of the Greek army was occupied keeping the Italians at bay in Albania, they were not ready. The Germans with Bulgarian assistance advanced south meeting no resistance. Greece was unprepared and they took Thessaloniki. They proceeded to enter the capital of Greece, Athens. Once they occupied Athens with their armed forces, they brought the entire country to its knees. The inhabitants of Athens shut themselves in their homes. The commandants moved into some of the nicer homes relocating entire families to one to two rooms within their own homes. Tanks and cannons lined the streets. The capital city was under guard and the freedoms of its citizens were gone. The “Liberators of the Third Reich” as they called themselves gathered up all the provisions of the city’s population and took them as their own. They left nothing for its citizens. It was of no concern if children, the old, the sick went hungry or died. Wine, bread, even water was for the commandants and their families only. The punishment for anyone caught taking food out of desperation to feed their children, public execution. The capital city soon became known as Golgotha, a place of public executions where the skulls of the executed could be seen in the streets. The streets were lined with decomposing bodies of Athenian citizens and colored red with their blood.

Section 4: Starvation

The streets of the city were filled with corpses daily. Rich and poor suffered the same fate in this once thriving city. Both died of starvation. The poor died quickly for they had nothing to give, not even money, in exchange for something to eat. The rich gave all they had, home, jewelry, money, art, that was not taken away, just for that one loaf of bread. And as they consumed the last breadcrumb, they

had no more to give and they too would succumb to the same fate, starvation. Starvation, like any well intended disease, spread quickly throughout the country. In the larger cities such as Athens, it was hard to find food and death was prevalent. Those that could live in the more rural areas outside of the cities had a chance to survive as long as they could harvest the spoils of the earth before the earth itself swallowed them.

“Mommy, we are hungry, please give us something to eat”.

“We have nothing, my dearest children. A little patience. Father will be here at any moment and will bring something I am sure of it.”

Mr. Thanasis, the judge from Patras, his trousers worn from his years sitting on the bench, was forced to become a peddler to be able to afford bread and clothes for his family. He would often purchase stockings and undergarments with which he would barter for wheat, potatoes, eggs, and whatever else he could find in the neighboring villages. The villagers were used to producing all they needed on a daily basis and had better odds for survival.

“Fotini, here are a few things I was able to obtain. Give the children an egg or a potato and boil the greens for us, without oil. And God will provide.”

“Thanasis, what will become of us? God can provide, as you say, but we cannot.”

“Gather up whatever valuables we have in the house, and we will sell them. I will return to the village and see what I can sell there for food.”

There was no bread available anywhere. The bakers’ ovens were forced to prepare bread only for the occupying forces. Hungry crowds gathered at their doors pleading for only one slice of bread. The

bakers would secretly and under the cover of night give away whatever was left over from the day's continuous baking. The bakers were terrified that they might be caught and in so doing would be executed immediately.

There was no soap for bathing. The filth and dirt on their bodies turned to scabies which is a skin condition that is caused by mites living under the skin. Death by starvation and disease continued without pity nor mercy from their invaders.

Most of the victims were in Athens and Piraeus. Children dealing with hunger ages ten and twelve became "jumpers". Defying danger, they would jump onto the back of moving German supply vehicles carrying particularly bread and canned goods. In Piraeus, five underage boys are waiting near the food warehouse of the German invader.

Twelve-year-old Nikos, the leader of a gang of starving children, is not afraid.

"My friends, I will jump onto the truck as soon as it is loaded and ready to leave. Run into the intersection. I know the truck will stop at that light and the traffic light is slow to change. I will quickly throw down all I can. Gather it up and quickly make your escape."

"All right, Nikos. We will be ready with bags in hand."

Events such as this one took place in Piraeus, in Athens, in Thessaloniki, in Patras. Whiskerless boys that starvation made into young heroes trying to provide a piece of bread for their families. Some were successful, most died for their efforts, they were the unfortunate ones. The German soldiers had their orders and bullets did not distinguish the very young. If they were caught taking food, their bodies could be found in the streets still holding on to that single piece of bread now soaked in their blood. Such was the fate for Nikos and his crew that day.

“Katina, when will this nightmare end? We have sold everything we had. Only our empty house remains. We have no other alternative but to sell our ancestral home. Without food we will die. Without shelter perhaps we can live.”

“There is no other solution, Vasilis. Do whatever you wish I no longer have the presence of mind to offer another option.” And so they handed over their home to disreputable buyers for a few thousand drachmas for a home worth one hundred times more, enough to buy food for the family for one month during which time they would now be homeless. In the chaos of war such heartless individuals, all the dregs of society, filled their pockets with stolen money. They would wait for hungry souls to emerge from their homes willing to sell their belongings, even their home, for one piece of bread. These individuals became the Nouveau Rich building their fortunes on the backs of the hungry and the poor. These individuals emerge in every war, opportunists, usually unpatriotic, those who have no homeland, no integrity, and no principles. They look for those that are willing to sacrifice all for their homeland, their ideals, and the wellbeing of their families for they are easy marks.

Section 5: The Battle of Crete – Hill 107

It was for those ideals and for the homeland that the patriots in Crete continued the struggle long after the mainland of Greece was lost. The island was free of invaders but its turn to be conquered was to come. It was May 20th, 1941, at 8 o'clock in the morning. A little over one month after April 6, 1941, the invasion of Crete began. The Cretans, inhabitants of this island, and New Zealanders, friends of Greece, fought the unwelcome visitors that dropped out of the sky to take their home.

The following treatise lays out in detail the struggle between attackers and defenders of a small island called Crete. The history of Crete is a long one. We have some information about its beginnings and its end is still unknown. Every inch of earth and every stone has been writing its history for thousands of years and will continue to do so as long as a single Cretan walks its mountain and shores. Every mountain and every plain, every shoreline and ravine, every gorge and cave, every city and village,

each has its own history, often written in the blood of their inhabitants. Their defensive struggles against the countless raids over time of barbarians, pirates, Franks, Venetians, Turks, and now Germans. Over the next few pages I will include some of my personal experiences during the invasion of Crete. The German invasion came by air with an unmatched ferocity. I experienced it in a place that appeared on the surface to be insignificant, yet it became the focal point of the German military strategy. This small town fell very quickly to the German forces and became the portal by which the German armies entered and ravaged this tiny island in eleven days. The house where I was born and spent the first years of my childhood is in one section of Maleme, Pyrgos, in the Chania territory. In the spring of 1941 I was a young man and still remember her vividly, as if it were only yesterday, the beauty of her pristine shores and hills. The meadows and hills were blanketed with poppies and chamomile. The sun, warm and caressing, protected the first moist buds of the vines. The peacefulness of the Cretan spring, whose beauty is incomparable, was altered that spring as the Greek and English soldiers prepared to defend the nearby airfield. Airplanes and artillery were brought in. Soldiers dug trenches. All of Crete was on edge as it prepared for what was to come. Crete unlike the rest of Greece was not as yet under German control but it was clear that morning this was about to change. The neglect of the English was great and frightful in trying to fortify the island so it could withstand such an attack. It was only in the last days of April of 1941 that the courageous New Zealander General Freyberg was appointed as commander of the Allied forces in Crete. With only a few troops at his disposal he fortified the airfields just the same. He was told by the English that he had to reroute his forces toward the sea from whence the invasion was expected, he did not abide. Southwest of the Maleme airfield there is a hill, which one month earlier was covered with cultivated vineyards. On that hill which they called "Hill 107", General Freyberg placed an experienced and highly capable New Zealander, Colonel Andrew, along with five select companies to protect the entire area between the torrent of Tavronitis to the west and the torrent of Sfakoriakou to the east. Their orders were to defend the airfield at all costs, as it appeared from the intensive bombing that was emerging that it would be the target of the enemy's invasion. Shortly after he established his

headquarters on the hill, only fifteen days before the invasion, Andrew cut down the vineyards, opened trenches, and positioned cannons. The critical hour was approaching, and he had to hurry. At 7:15 on the morning of May 20th, the war began not from the sea as proposed by the English, but by the air. The inhabitants from their homes and the soldiers from the trenches watched over 400 planes of the Luftwaffe and the stukas with their hissing tear apart the flesh of Crete. The smoke and dust choked the defenders, and a black cloud covered the sky, until one hour later, at 8:15 am to be exact, the lead regiment of paratroopers dropped onto the position that Andrew was to defend. The German commander of the regiment, General Meindl and the regimental commanders were the first to land. Colonel Braun, whose troops came down near the Tavronitis bridge, has his first encounter with the local Cretan snipers. Braun was advancing towards the eastern bank of the river toward the hill when he was attacked. The experienced Colonel that came down with his entire regiment at the mouth of the Tavronitis began advancing towards the airfield. Major Stenzler, who later became the military commander in Chania, fought with his unit the inhabitants of the villages Vlaheronitissa, Sirili, and Xamoudohori, then turned north aiming for Hill 107. The German paratroopers who descended on Pyrgos were greeted by fired conflict with the locals and the New Zealanders.

On the terrace of our home, which managed to remain standing despite exploding bombs and fires surrounding it, the English setup their guns twice and the German three times. Although at times it appeared as if the Germans might lose, the battle continued stubbornly. The airplanes continued to drop more troops and weapons to take the airfield and Hill 107. Many paratroopers were shot down by the local resistance, yet it only increased the efforts and the resolve of the German army. Major Braun's paratroopers managed to create a stronghold on the east bank of the Tavronitis Bridge and now seriously threaten the hill overlooking the airfield. The young captain, Gericke, who later became commander of the paratroopers, took command when Major Braun was mortally wounded.

The defender of Hill 107, the heroic New Zealander, Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Andrew, stood amongst the smoke and dust, looking despairingly towards the bridgehead, uneasy and sad because

communication with his comrades had been cut off. He communicated with the commander of the 5th New Zealand brigade, Brigadier James Hargest, who was directing the battles in the area from Platania and told him that he needed a regiment to assist him.

“All the regiments are involved in tough battles with the paratroopers,” was his response. Hill 107, despite being heavily surrounded by the forces of Captain Gericke and Major Stenzler, continued to resist, and Lieutenant Colonel Andrew from his hill continued to keep the invaders at bay. The planes continued to bombard the hill and eventually Andrew’s guns fell silent. Disappointed and saddened, Andrew requested permission from Brigadier Hargest in Platania to retreat. The brigadier responded with a phrase that sealed the fate of Crete, “If you must, you must”.

The legendary and strategic Hill 107 was abandoned in the evening hours by its defenders. Captain Gericke, whom the Germans named the “Conqueror of Maleme,” triumphantly raises the frightful cross cramponnée at its peak. The area of defense of the entire command of the Cretan forces passed on to the enemy.

Today, so many years later, a black cross on the hill strews the sorrow and grief of its dark color onto the joyful green around it. It reminds the passerby and the visitor that this hill changed the fate of Crete on a bright spring morning in 1941. Today the German cemetery lies on Hill 107. Six thousand young men between the ages of 20 - 23 years old rest beneath these headstones, victims of a paranoid dictator that believed he would dominate the world. The black cross on the hilltop counsels future generations that war and killing lead only to calamity and destruction. Peace and brotherhood amongst all peoples brings prosperity and happiness.

Section 6: Executions

The paranoid dictator of the north did not expect resistance to his violent occupation of the countries he wanted to conquer. He was all powerful and successful in his military strategies. He sought

understanding and open arm acceptance. His future subjects must bow their heads and welcome him. Some countries did just that and he thanked them for their acceptance of this new order. Others refused his generosity, and he took revenge, group and individual executions of their inhabitants was the cost. The tiny country of Greece was not one to accept these barbarians from the north. Greece refused to concede, and so mass executions began. The patriots were lined up for execution. Their sacrifice was for the survival of their homeland. They were mowed down by the German machine guns, yet that did not diminish the efforts of others. More and more followed their example. The strength of the soul rather than the strength of iron was their supremacy. It is that strength that makes the weak into supermen. It was this soul, this spirit, that this dictator wish to conquer and break. Yet his cannons and guns could not deter their spirit. The brave young men of this small country would not welcome this invader. They would not take off their caps, bow their heads and say, "This way sir, take what you will, it is yours to take". Denial and disdain of the weak for the strong was rewarded with bullets by the executioner. Executions continuously throughout the country tried to eliminate the heroes but to no avail. The majority of the executions were in Crete. There the invader lost many troops. The inhabitants did not allow them to set foot on their sacred ground. The Germans suffered many casualties in the first hours of the invasion, a company of III Battalion, 1st Assault Regiment lost 112 killed out of 126 men and 400 of 600 men in III Battalion were killed on the first day. They had to pay for such rudeness for not receiving their visitors from the sky with open arms and not serving them the *tsikoudia* that they offer to their welcomed friends. *Tsikoudia*, an alcoholic beverage, a fragrant, grape-based pomace brandy of Cretan origin to welcome visitors to the island of Crete. Their machine guns would take the lives of many. Twenty-eight young men here, one hundred and eight there. For the death of one German soldier, 35 young men would be rounded up and executed. Those that were left alive by some chance of fate had to dig the graves of the others. All the villagers were taken out of their homes and brought to the center of the square so they could bear witness to this atrocity. Photos were taken and sent back to Berlin to receive accolades from Hitler. Those left behind did not falter or change their resolve. If anything it increased their determination

to fight, to resist, at all costs. Crete offered high mountains and deep ravines for protection. Young men gathered and planned their revenge.

Section 7: Resistance

All of the mainland of Greece and now Crete fell under the control of the German invaders. The children between the ages of 12 - 15 years old formed the National Patriotic Organization of Youth (EPON). The purpose of this organization was to train young children to resist these invaders of their homeland and to return the future of Greece back to this new generation. The children, defying danger and possibly death under the faint light of the moon, with paint buckets and brushes in hand, painted slogans against their conquerors on the walls. The children set the stage and soon enough another organization called the National Liberation Front (EAM) was formed by the adult resistance fighters, and another called the National Organization of Crete (EOK). In the latter organizations foreign nationals would join the fight. Constant strikes by guerrilla fighters became a thorn in the sides of the German troops. Their camps in Crete were located amongst the peaks of Psiloritis, at an altitude of 8,000 feet. The German soldiers were not comfortable climbing to this height, so the resistance force would easily attack and disappear into the mountains. Unfortunately, the inhabitants of the lower valley villages paid the price for those attacks. If a German soldier was killed, many villagers would face death. The invaders hoped this would end the resistance, but it did not. If anything it gave it more fuel. Bridges filled with enemy trucks were dynamited. Watch towers and guard houses were destroyed. They did not know where these guerillas would attack next. Eventually the oppressed were freed but not before many had perished at the hands of these invaders.

Section 8: Abduction of a General

In recounting the achievements of the enslaved Greek people whose resistance to the invader became myth, we cannot omit an event so grand and impossible that it really must constitute a myth. The abduction in Crete of the German military Commandant of the island after its occupation, General Kreipe. The English assisted the people of Crete in their struggle during the resistance.

Two spies, part of the Allied Middle Eastern Command, British army officers Fermor and Moss, parachuted secretly into occupied Crete one night. They contacted the Cretan guerrillas in the mountains, in keeping with the plan laid out by the Middle Eastern Command, the bold plan was to abduct the German general. Assisting the two spies were two young Cretan resistance fighters, George Tirakis from the village of Amari, 24 years old, who had fought in Albania and returned to his homeland of Crete recently, prior to the invasion, and Michael Paterakis, from the village of Kostoherako, a gendarme who was an expert with guns. He was a well-trained sniper and had sent many paratroopers to another dimension rather than setting foot on Cretan soil. In addition there were more Cretans ready to help as needed. The first step in this operation was the surveillance of the General's movements. He resided in the Villa Ariadne in the village of Knossos, near Heraklion. Across from the villa and a little to the right was the home of Akoumianakis, another patriot, an active member of the mission. He monitored the General's movements to and away from his home. The abduction had been scheduled for the night of February 6th, 1944. But it did not happen. Various obstacles caused it to be delayed. One delay led to another, on April 24th, 1944, Akoumianakis and an associate, Athanassakis, watched the movements of the General, but he did not leave his home that day. Finally on April 26th, the General left his home in the morning for his office, which was on Martiriou Street in Ano Arhanes. All was in place for the abduction for that night. The General left his office at 8:30 pm. It was dark.

The two Englishmen wearing the uniform of the German military police, the Gestapo, waited in the middle of the road leading to the villa. The remaining abductors with their two leaders, all of them Cretan resistance, were hidden in trenches on either side of the road. At a turn in the road that was hidden by a small rise Akoumianakis and Athanassakis saw the General's limousine approaching. They notified the others. At exactly 9:30 pm, the limousine reached the spot where the two "Germans" Fermor and Moss stood in the middle of the road with a written Stop sign. The General's limo stopped. The military police saluted and asked the general and his driver for their papers. The two men handed them over. Fermor was beside the limo at the door of the back seat. Moss was on the

other side by the driver's door. Both invaded the car with guns and immediately Tirakis and Paterakis leaped out of the trenches. Tirakis dragged the General out of the car, threw him to the ground, and bound his hands and feet.

The General began shouting "What is this?"

Moss replied, "We are English operatives, and we are taking you to Egypt as our prisoner of war."

Paterakis, moving quickly picked up the General from the ground and tossed him into the back of the car. He pushed him to the floor with a gun to his head. Tirakis and Paterakis jumped into the back seat, both of them hunched over the General and trying to appear invisible from the outside of the car. Fermor was now wearing the General's hat and sitting in the seat previously occupied by the General. Moss, sitting in the driver's seat, started the limo and disappeared into the darkness. The other Cretan resistance fighters remained behind to erase any evidence of the abduction, taking with them the unconscious German driver. The entire abduction was quick and fortunately so, for if it were a few minutes later the entire operation would have failed. A military transport truck filled with German soldiers, passed that very spot, but the abductors were long gone. The abductors separated when they had traveled to a safe distance. Moss, the two Cretan leaders and a few more men took the General over to the steep slopes of Psiloritis to reach the Libyan Sea where they would rendezvous with a British submarine that would take them to Egypt. Fermor left the limo earlier to ensure they were not followed and united with Moss at the submarine's location. The submarine arrived on time and the two Englishmen, and the unfortunate General arrived in Egypt. It was a major embarrassment for the dictator of the Third Reich.

The curse of war which consumed us for four years was finally lifted. It left Greece with incurable wounds. We lost so many people, whole families, and villages. Those that made it through were left having to rebuild their lives all over again. Starvation and poverty left many without a foundation

upon which to rebuild their lives. Businesses failed and homes were gone except for the rich few that had profited from the war. Many were still homeless. Our allies helped us to rebuild but it was a long road home.