

Cretan Journeys:

The road to Sfakia

Mike Sweet visits some of the sites in western Crete that mark historic Australian actions in the Battle of Crete.

AS THE plane turns in its approach Chania's airport the view from the left side window reveals a stretch of water that is forever marked by the events that took place here. Souda Bay was the arrival point in April 1941 for some 8,500 Australian troops extracted from the mainland as the German occupation of Greece advanced. All but 2500 were on the

Long disused, the bridge is still there, its stone columns pock-marked with bullet holes, its iron work still bearing the violent scars of heavy gun fire.

With the Maleme airstrip lost, reinforcements quickly bolstered the German advance and the allies were compelled to retreat, with units engaged in heroic rear guard actions in the days after. None more so than

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island when the invasion began on May 20, 1941.

Today the road from the airport takes you down its northern edge. Look out for a left hand turn, signposted to the Allied War Cemetery, for here is the resting place of 1,527 British and Commonwealth service personnel who gave their lives during the Battle of Crete; 197 are Australian and 447 are New Zealanders.

The fallen lie beside the fateful shore where they first disembarked. Like all cemeteries maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the white headstones stand in serried ranks upon a green grass lawn, stretching back, to a vanishing point in the distance. To walk the lines, or just sit awhile and contemplate, is a melancholy and moving experience, to honour their sacrifice, to thank them.

Drive the national road west past Chania, take the exit to Tavronitis, and you will reach Maleme. Above on the high ground, known as Hill 107, was where allied troops desperately shelled the Maleme airfield as the German forces advanced.

Many of the German troops remain here. On the first day alone 1,856 were killed. The carefully tended German war cemetery that looks out across the airfield is the last resting place of 4,465 of the estimated 6,500 Germans killed in the Battle for Crete, and during the island's occupation.

The airfield and surrounding ground at Maleme is perhaps the most haunting of the Battle for Crete sites. It was here that the first German paratroopers and glider borne forces began the invasion in the early morning of May 20, 1941. And it was here that some of the cruelest fighting took place, as the Germans, wrestled the airfield from its defenders, mostly Anzac troops. Maleme's tranquility today belies the carnage and brutality that took place upon and around it.

To the west of the strip which is still intact and used by the Greek airforce, near the new coast road bridge, lies the old iron bridge across the Tavronitis river where many of the first German gliders came to rest.

that which took place at 42nd Street.

It's not far, through the tatty outer reaches of Chania and west of Souda, to a nondescript lane running south-east for not much more than a kilometre. Today it's called Tsivalarion. In May 1941 it was known as 42nd Street to the diggers. Here, as German forces pushed towards Souda Bay on the seventh day of the battle, Australian and Maori forces undertook a ferocious bayonet charge that pushed back the German advance and bought precious time for the allied troops in their desperate withdrawal south.

Take the E75 national road in the direction of Rethymno and you cross the ground where the largest concentration of Australian forces defended a 50km line from Georgopouli and the beaches of Almiros Bay in the west, to beyond the Rethymno airfield in the east. For the ten days that the Battle of Crete raged, Australian and Greek forces defended their positions and counter attacked, with most of the actions taking place in defence of the airfield between Perivolia and Stavrommenos.

Overpowered and outflanked, and unable to join the evacuating forces heading to Sfakia, commanders had finally to offer their troops two options - head for the hills, or surrender.

On the night of May 29 troops took turns on the beach flashing the morse letter 'A' seawards in case Royal Navy ships might be on hand to save them, to no avail. Most of the Australian forces in this sector surrendered on May 30 1941, although over 50 officers and soldiers eventually escaped to Egypt by submarine after months in the mountains.

At the same time as the Germans were besieging Rethymno and further east, where an Australian battalion fought in defence of Heraklion, in the west the invaders pushed the British Commonwealth and Hellenic forces steadily southward. At the village of Stilos, Australian and New Zealand forces held off a German mountain battalion while the allies funneled towards Vrisses.

Today in Vrisses' town centre, the sun paints a dappled light through towering plane trees to the river



German soldiers preparing to execute Cretans for their support of the Allied troops.



29 May 1941. Victorious German (Alpine) soldiers enter the city of Heraklion, Crete. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL ACT



German soldiers in battle.

below, and it was in the shade of these same trees, thousands of allied troops passed, heading up the single winding road that leads south over the mountains to Sfakia. As you look up the road today, you can almost see them still, footsore, thirsty, defeated and desperate.

The road to Sfakia, 43 kilometres beyond, crosses the Lefka Ori and then plummets to the coast. Over four nights in the last days of May 1941, 16,000 troops were evacuated from Sfakia to Egypt, leaving 5,000 behind. Some 500 chose to go it alone, and with the help of the

Cretan resistance, avoided capture for years. On June 1st the allied surrender was taken by the Germans at Komitades, just above Sfakia. From that point on, with allied help the Cretan resistance took the fight to the occupying forces. German records put the number of civilians executed by firing squad as 3,474, and at least a further 1,000 killed in massacres in late 1944. Cretan sources put the actual numbers as much higher.

These appalling figures tell another heart-wrenching story of the war in Crete. Like all locations that have experienced great heroism, courage



A local village captured by a German Soldier.

and sacrifice, the vibrations of those events remain. Sixty eight years ago Anzacs, British and Hellenic forces, with the people of Crete, fought against a ruthless aggressor. The tell-tale signs of that heroic story are still there for all to find.

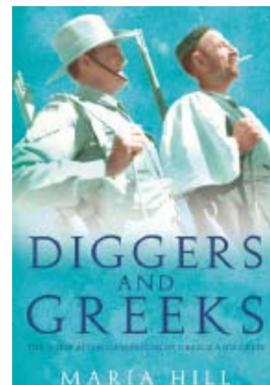
Recommended reading: *Australia in the War of 1939-1945. Greece, Crete and Syria. Author: Gavin Long* *Crete - Battle ground Mediterranean. The Airborne Invasion 1941 by Tim Saunders.*

Crete - The Battle and the Resistance by Antony Beevor.

The Battle of Crete

A campaign ignored

Dr Maria Hill a visiting fellow at the Australian Defence Force Academy is highly critical of the way the Australian and Greek authorities are ignoring the WWII Battle of Crete.



Maria Hill's book.



A Cretan levende.

THE organising committee for this commemoration, at least in Sydney, is concerned that soon there will be no event to remember the Australian soldiers and their Greek allies who fought in these campaigns, held on or around the May 20, the day the German paratroopers invaded Crete, now, 68 years ago.

It appears with the aging of the veterans that attendance is fizzling out and without strong support from the Australian public and the Greek and Australian governments it will cease to be commemorated. Cost cutting measures have impacted on the remembrance of this campaign.

And while thousands of Australians attend dawn services at or about Gallipoli, with funds and enormous publicity directed at this event, very few people are aware that a commemoration takes place every year in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, attended by high ranking Greek generals, to remember the fallen of the Greek and Crete campaigns. Why is this the case, when like

terror in the hearts of their victims. Most soldiers only just managed to escape with their life, remarking that the evacuation from the Greek mainland made Dunkirk seem like child's play.

Later, most of these soldiers were on the front line again, this time on Crete without equipment, arms and

of World War Two, but is it? Who decides what we commemorate? The attention that Gallipoli and Kokoda receive in the History curriculum particularly in New South Wales would certainly account for much of their popularity.

One Australian veteran told me that the reason Greece and Crete

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As the elite Cretan V division had been deployed to the Greek mainland to fight Italians on the Albanian front, only raw Greek recruits from the mainland, old men, women and children were left, alongside the Cretan police and the Anzac troops, to defend the island.

Although the Allies had a greater number of troops on Crete than the Germans, they lacked the guns and bullets needed to fight a war. Poor planning and preparation on the part of the British meant that the Aussies and their Greek allies were placed in an impossible situation.

The Allied Commander New Zealand General, Bernard Freyberg, was in charge of the overall defence of the island. Unfortunately, he did not heed the top-secret advice he was given that told him when and where the German attacks would take place.

As a result the airfield at Maleme on the western side of the island near Chania was lost on the first day, opening the way for a German land attack.

Whereas the Australian officer Lieutenant Colonel Ian Campbell in charge of defending the airstrip at Rethymon, located between Chania and Heraklion, implemented a brilliant strategy, he was forced to surrender because his ran out of ammunition and supplies. And the irony is that while the Australian defence of Rethymon remains relatively unknown and unrecognised in Australia, on Crete Ian Campbell was made an honorary citizen and has streets named after him and the Australian fighters.

Why is it that, some campaigns get enormous media coverage while others receive very little? Kokoda, for example has taken over from Gallipoli as the most important campaign

is neglected apart from not being studied at schools, is that the British and Australian governments were ashamed of these campaigns.

This is not surprising, as it must have been a major embarrassment to them, particularly when the public discovered in 1941 that Australia had agreed to Britain's request to deploy Australian troops in a campaign that had no chance of success and in another without adequate equipment, supplies and air cover.

And subsequently exposed the Greek people to the most ruthless occupation of their country, resulting in the starvation and death of over 300,000 civilians. Is it any wonder that the Australian campaigns in the Greek mainland and in Crete remain forgotten? After all, no-one wants their dirty laundry aired in public, even seventy years on; but isn't that all the more reason for greater scrutiny and remembrance?

Dr Maria Hill is Visiting Fellow at the Australian Defence Force Academy at the University of New South Wales. For the past six years she has been researching and writing a book on the Greek and Crete campaigns that is due to be published by UNSW Press in March 2010 entitled *Diggers and Greeks: the Australian Campaigns in Greece and Crete*. Maria is happy to hear from anyone interested in talking to her about their own or a family member's experience in the Greek and Crete campaigns and can be contacted via her website at: <http://www.mariahill.com.au>



The 2009 Battle of Crete program of activities

PanCretan Association & the Cretan Brotherhood: 68th Anniversary of the Battle of Crete Program for Melbourne.

Wed 11am sharp - Public lecture by author of *Forgotten Anzacs* Peter Ewer at the Visitors Centre Shrine of Remembrance. Open discussion will take place among Greek and Australian WWII Veterans.

Thursday May 21 - 8.30pm Arrival of the representatives of the Hellenic Armed Forces comprising of the Deputy Chief of the Hellenic Armed Forces Lieutenant General Konstantinos Kalamatas HA accompanied by his wife Nektaria Lambrinaki, and his aide Commander Leonidas Tsiantoulas HN, from Wellington NZ.

Friday May 22 - 9.00am Visit to St. Johns Greek Orthodox College in 21 Railway Place West Preston. **11.00am** Visit to Alphonso Grammar School which is at Old Heidelberg Rd. Alphonso **2.00pm** Visit to the St. Anargyri Greek Orthodox College which is at 73 - 81 Willelson Road Oakleigh. **7.30pm** Cocktail reception in honour of the Hellenic Armed Forces at the Members Pavilion at the Cretan Village at 90 Cathies Lane Wantirna South, hosted by the Pancretan Association and the Cretan Brotherhood. Musicians from Crete Nikos Shinarakis (Lyra) and Gianni Kraniotakis (Lute) will entertain.

Saturday May 23 7.30pm - Official Dinner Dance to Celebrate the 68th Anniversary of the Battle of Crete under the auspices of our Consul General Mr. Christos Salamantis at the Cretan Centre at 148 Nicholson Street East Brunswick. Musicians from Crete Manolis Shinarakis (Lyra) and Nikos Kraniotakis (Lute) as well as dance performances from the Pancretan & Cretan Brotherhood Dance Groups will perform.

Sunday 24 - Doxology Church Service at the St. Efstathios Greek Orthodox Church situated at 221 Dorcas Street South Melbourne. Parade and Wreath Laying Ceremony at the forecourt of the Shrine of Remembrance, with the participation of the Hellenic & Australian Armed Forces, local groups, community Australian schools and more importantly the Australian Veteran Associations. **12.30pm** Visit to the Olive Tree planted in the Gardens of the Shrine of Remembrance. **1.00pm** Brief Ceremony at the Australian Hellenic Memorial in the Domain Gardens hosted by the 39ers Association, the 6th Division and the Australian Hellenic Memorial Foundation. **4.00pm** Official Delegation departs Melbourne.