

The Battle of Crete: Fight for Freedom

Good afternoon ladies and Gentlemen.

It is so nice to see so many of you here today and I am pleased to welcome many friends and acquaintances in the audience. Before I speak to you, please allow me to extend my sincere thanks to Gene Rossides, founder of AHI and to Nick Larigakis, AHI's Executive Director, for their invitation to this noon forum.

As a brief introduction, I was born on the island of Crete and came to America 39 years ago. I studied Electrical Engineering, went to business for myself and also became very active with the Greek American community. As a hobby, I love to read and write poetry, read literary works and specifically books of history.

The Battle of Crete is a piece of history that has captivated me since I was a young boy in my hometown of Chania. The region around Chania, and specifically Maleme, is the battleground of the initial Nazi invasion of Crete and the place where the fiercest battles took place. As a young boy I was able to reconcile the living stories told by my father and others, regarding World War II and the Battle of Crete, with many monuments that were erected in various spots in the prefecture of Chania.

For example, I paid visits to the German cemetery in Maleme where more than 1,000 soldiers rest; the huge statue of a cement eagle ("to pouli") that the Germans build upon a hilltop to commemorate the fact that the island was taken by air; the marble obelisk monument that the Greeks erected in Tavronitis to honor the local Battle of Crete heroes, and many other sites.

I was fascinated by the stories of bravery told by the Cretans who participated in the Battle and the famous Resistance that followed. Some of them had the scars of battlefield wounds on their bodies as a testament to their stories.

I remember as a young lad, asking an old fighter how many Nazis he killed during the Battle, only to get a stern gaze and two eyes full of tears as an answer... then and there I understood that freedom is indeed earned with pain and sacrifice, and never asked that question again!

I remember the horror that I felt, and still do, when stories of Nazi brutalities and executions of innocent Cretans, including women and children, were told and re-told. The memories then were still fresh, and the Battle of Crete had carved deep emotional scars in the hearts and souls of the Cretans, scars that were concealed by the local women routinely covering their heads and faces with solid black scarves and the men wearing black-beaded netted scarves around their heads. In the recollections of my youth, I do not remember any household that did not have some casualty attributed to the war. And I will never forget those black scarves on the heads of both men and women, as if they were keepers of memories past, silently heralding and keeping history alive.

Sixty four years ago on May 20th, 1941, at 6:30 am, the Nazi air assault against the island of Crete begun, primarily around the Maleme airfield just outside the town of Chania. For about one hour squadrons of bomber and fighter aircraft started to shell and

bomb the area, reaching climax around 7:30 am when five bomber aircraft dropped a string of 1,000 kg (2,000 lbs) bombs on the Tavronitis and Platanias area. As the eruptions of those bombs were subsiding, the sky filled with transport and glider planes releasing colorful parachutes, with soldiers and supplies, toward earth.

The Battle for Crete had begun!

It is not my intention here to give you a detail account of the Battle, since there are many well written books about the subject, rather I will attempt to present an overview and commentary on the ten days that it took the Nazis to conquer the island; to talk about the significance of the Battle in the outcome of World War II; and finally to pay homage to the brave Cretans who fought “the most glorious and yet the most unusual” battle of World War II.

Hitler had decided to invade Crete with the hope that its capture would allow the Nazis to take control of the communication channels through the Suez Canal, to conquer the Middle East in order to control its oil fields and thus cutting-off the important supply lines to the British. For Hitler, Crete was indeed an important strategic island and it had to be taken, no matter what the price.

For the operation, Hitler and his generals, decided to use, for the first time, the elite 7th Parachute division, a well trained and very discipline “live airborne weapon”. Hitler deployed 3,500 paratroopers during the operation against Crete, hoping that the battle would be short and the victory swift. But, his hopes were decimated just like his elite paratroopers that left their final breath on Cretan soil.

The allied forces from Britain, Australia and New Zealand, assisted by make-shift Greek military forces and heroic Cretan civilians who used knives, pitchforks and sickles as weapons, fought bravely and held the invading force at bay for ten days, before Nazi Germany finally declared victory.

The commanding German General Kurt Student called it “the fiercest struggle that any German formation had ever had to face” and on the ninth day of the Battle Adolph Hitler asked general Student, “France fell in eight days, why is Crete still free?”

When the fighting was finally over, Hitler may have won the Battle for Crete, but the victory came with a heavy price. Over 6,000 German soldiers lost their lives fighting the Battle for Crete, a number heavier than the total number of German troops killed in the war to that date. The losses of the elite 7th parachute division alone were of such significant proportion that no large scale airborne operation was ever attempted by Nazi Germany again for the remainder of the war.

My father fought World War II with the Greek Army in the front lines in the mountains of Albania. He participated in the victories at Klyssoura and Tepeleni and saw the Italian Army be defeated by the Greeks. However, he also witnessed the assault of the Nazi forces against Greece and the eventual retreat of the Greek forces, after failing to hold their brave defenses against the military might and superior equipped invader.

Before his death my father gave me his personal diary, a daily account of his World War II experiences. In that diary I found an entry regarding the Battle of Crete, which I would like to give you, in translation: *“On May 20th, 1941, the operations against Crete began.*

A couple of days before the invasion, the German forces staged a grand parade in the streets of Athens. The day of the invasion the Athenian sky was covered with planes. Later on, waves of different types of aircraft were flying to and from Crete. The (censored) newspapers published the distraction that the planes were inflicting on Crete, while from various sources I learned about the casualties that the Germans had suffered. I start to worry about my family in Crete, since I cannot get any news.... [Months passed since the invasion] and I have decided to leave Athens for Crete. On August 4, 1941, I learned that there was a boat leaving for Crete. I went to Perama and boarded a small boat. We left at 8:00 pm, 200 men without food or water. The next morning I saw the Cretan mountains in the horizon and my heart was pounding from joy. By the time we approached land the sea was rough. I finally jumped on land and with a few others we started to walk. At the village of Spilia we were fed. We slept there and in the morning we traveled toward Chania (more than 40 kms away). In the village of Tavronitis we encountered a German checkpoint and as we traveled through Maleme airport [the main theater of the Nazi invasion] I could see piles upon piles of destroyed aircraft. When we reached Chania I was shocked! The town was leveled; all the buildings appeared to be destroyed. Finally from Chania I made it to my village Kalyves and was reunited with my family. I found a job as a truck driver and during a trip to Heraklion I witnessed the destruction that the Battle of Crete had inflicted upon that city also. The Germans are building up their Army in Crete. I learned that they are heading for Libya. Life is getting very difficult now. I am back at the village working the fields. We have no more bread and we are forced to barter our clothes for wheat..."

These are but a few accounts of the Battle of Crete. Its impact in the final outcome of World War II is now recognized by many historians, and as more and more evidence and documents are surfacing, its significance takes even larger dimensions.

Former Representative Dornan, speaking in the US House of Representatives on May 15th, 1996, at a special order that was initiated by the Pancretan Association of America to commemorate the 55th Anniversary of the Battle of Crete, said: *"We must study World War II. It is an epic, a watershed of centuries. And when we focus on certain battles, like the struggle for Crete, I think it is a worthy subject for young Americans to study in high school."*

During the same special order, Rep. Pallone noted: *"I am proud to have been able to participate in the remembrance of a historical event as important as the Battle of Crete. As the sacrifices the Cretans made 55 years ago demonstrate, we are indebted to Greece not only for giving the world [democracy] the system upon which our country was founded, but for shedding the blood of their sons and daughters to protect that system as well. I strongly encourage all Americans to join me in honoring Greek-Americans and our friends in Greece and Crete for their contribution to one of the most important battles of the 20th century."*

Indeed, the Battle of Crete was a pivotal World War II "fight for freedom" and it may have played a bigger role in the demise of the Third Reich than previously believed. It is now widely accepted that the Battle of Crete delayed Hitler's planned invasion of Russia, only to face the ferocious winter that broke the spirit and momentum of the Nazi forces and led them to defeat.

Lieutenant General Ioannis Kakoudakis, wrote in the 2000 edition of the book "The Battle of Crete": *"The resistance offered by the Allied (British and Commonwealth)*

forces, the Hellenic Army troops and the armed and unarmed civilians on the island, delayed the Germans by six weeks in implementing their Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. Thus, the sacrifices of the participants in this battle indirectly contributed to the ultimate defeat of Nazi Germany in the War”.

Furthermore, Marshall Goering, Hitler’s close associate, has advocated that the decimation of Hitler’s paratroopers on the island of Crete prevented Nazi Germany from using that force to plan an airborne assault and eventual takeover of the British Isles.

Having gathered here today to commemorate the 64th anniversary of the Battle of Crete, let us pay homage and respect to the memories of all the Allied and Greek freedom fighters, and particularly those brave civilian Cretan men and women who fought valiantly and many of whom shed their blood to defend the timeless principles of freedom and democracy.

It is indeed appropriate that this commemoration takes place at the American Hellenic Institute in Washington DC, an institution dedicated to promote and defend Hellenic national issues based on the rule-of-law and the interests of our country, the United States of America.

As we leave here today let’s remember these universal words of wisdom: *“Glory to all those, whose fate has given them the honor to guard Thermopylae.”*

Thank you, and may God bless!

(This address was delivered by George C. Chryssis at the Hellenic House of the American Hellenic Institute, on May 18th, 2005, commemorating the 64th anniversary of the historic Battle of Crete)