

**The Battle of Crete: Nazi's Elite War-Machine Stopped Largely
by Crete's Non-Combatant Population**

by: Manolis Velivasakis, President
Pancretan Association of America.

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to see all of you here today and especially to see many friends and colleagues! I want to thank Nick Laringakis, AHI's Executive Director, for his kind invitation to this Noon Forum, to speak to you on the subject of the *Battle of Crete*, an event which as it turns out, was pivotal in the eventual defeat of the Nazis.

As a brief introduction, **I was born in small village high up in the Psiloritis Mountains in Heraklion Crete.** I came to the United States 35 years ago, as a young Engineering student, and somehow never managed to find my way back, for a good reason perhaps!

Over the years, besides running a Design Office with a world-wide Architectural/Engineering practice, **I have always found it necessary to be involved with the Greek-American and Cretan American community.** Currently, **I am serving as President of the Pancretan Association of America**, an umbrella organization of some and 8,000 members organized in 84 local Chapters around the country.

Although an Engineer by training and profession, History has always captivated me since I was a young man! Particularly the history of the place of my birth, Crete, and the constant struggles of its inhabitants against foreign invaders and conquerors for many centuries.

In particular the *Battle of Crete* against the German invaders during World War II and the subsequent Resistance against the Nazi occupation of the island, **were such events that have captured my imagination, especially since both my parents lived through them,** and years later

recounted to me and my sister on many occasions, their recollections and hardships during those trying times!

The Cretan version of the popular song of Digenis Akritas goes like this.... « *π* _____ *π* _____.....»

“He who’s got guns, let him use them and he who’s got none, let him find some.....so all together we can fight the enemy for our freedom and dignity”

This popular song proved to be precisely correct yet again in another battle to conquer Crete. Where the heroic inhabitants of the island were not deterred by the fact that they had no modern weapons to fight the German elite war-machine! And once again the Cretans relied on their age-old instincts for Freedom and rose up to the occasion and used whatever weapons they could find, to fight yet another battle for freedom and this time to actually halt, for 10 whole days, the then world’s most advanced war-machine!

Today, 65 years after the *Battle of Crete* and after the publications of archives by both sides, **historians now can objectively assess and evaluate the wider meaning of Greece’s participation in the 2nd World War.**

On the *strategic* side, with **the Greek Army moving deep into Albania**, suddenly **created an interception front** to the forces of the Nazi Axis, which then dominated the largest part of the European continent. As it turns out, this front, **actually led to Hitler’s decision to attack the Balkans six months later**, postponing for 40 fatal days the start of operation *“Barbarossa”* against the Soviet Union. But even later, **the presence of the Greek troops at the war-fronts of the Eastern Mediterranean and mostly the Greek people’s mighty fight for Resistance** in the towns and the countryside of the occupied parts of Greece, formed **an essential component of support for the Allied joint operations.**

In those crucial days, during the peak of hardship for all European people, the assertive resistance of the Greeks to the forces of totalitarianism and violence, encouraged and inspired all those who, under extremely difficult circumstances, continued the fight for Freedom and Democracy. Everything that happened during that same period in the island of Crete proves to reinforce and emphasize the above general assertions.

The geo-political position of Crete - as is very well known - was always important. From the pre-historical times to the ancient ones, from the medieval times to the more recent, but even to this day, **the dominance in Crete has been considered necessary in order to ensure control over the Eastern Mediterranean.** Byzantines, Arabs, Venetians, Turks one after the other, **combined the conquest of Crete with their dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean,** while at the same time, **the Great Powers, never stopped searching for ways to indirectly impose their own control.** Winston Churchill himself had declared his decision to protect the island, under any circumstances, believing that Souda-Bay needed to become *“the amphibious fortress on the castle known as Crete”*.

The same opinion, however, on the opposite side of the spectrum, was shared by the opponents of Great Britain. Crete -the Germans believed- as a naval base and an Air-Force base is the “key” to the Eastern Mediterranean; and its occupation was destined to influence the whole progress of the operations in the Middle East and the Northern African Coast.

It was the strategic need, without a doubt, that influenced the final decision of the Nazis to attack Crete. Along with operation *“Barbarossa”*, the campaign against the Soviet Union, **in parallel, Hitler had plotted since December 1940, operation “Marita” for the attack against Greece.** Before moving onto Russian ground, **he wanted to be secured from the British threat in the south.**

The invasion in Crete, however, will only be decided twenty days after the start of operation “Marita”, on April 25th, 1941. It was only then that the **directive #28**, was issued, which approved the execution of this mission, under the code name **“Mercury”**.

Today, we know that **Hitler did not want to attack Crete**. The Head of Hitler’s Airborne Paratroopers, General Kurt Student – *as he himself later confessed that he bitterly regretted having made this proposal -* **proposed it** and easily convinced the Air Force Commander, Grand-Marshal H. Goering and the two of them together, **eventually succeeded to convince Hitler and the Heads of Military**, under the condition that operation **“Barbarossa” would not be postponed, not even for a single day!**

However, **before we attempt to refer to some of the main facts** that took place and finally decided the outcome in the ***Battle of Crete***, let’s try **to distinguish the protagonists of this historic encounter**.

On the one side, **the Germans**, based on their **absolute superiority on the skies**, had adopted Lt. General Kurt Student’s plan, the architect of the elite Airborne Division, **which had already successfully participated in battles in Northern Europe**. On the other side, **the British, New Zealanders and Australians** in their majority, most of whom had taken part in the recent campaign in mainland Greece, were supposedly preparing the island for the German attack. And yet, **during the six months that intervened**, after the British Prime Minister declared that he had decided to protect Crete, **no serious preparation actually took place**. To the contrary, **the incredible losses of the British in terms of planes**, during the campaign in Greece, **had dramatically limited the potential for Air force actions**. The **Germans thus had complete air superiority**.

Up until this moment, **I purposely avoided referring to the main protagonists in the Battle of Crete** that is to **the people of Crete**.

“All the Cretans wish to fight”- Allied General Freyberg had stressed, right from the start.

Indeed, the **Cretans, overcoming their open discontent towards King George**, who had moved his headquarters to the island, **and despite being deprived of their youths who had formed the Cretan Division in Epirus and were fighting in Albania, the locals** - mostly middle-aged men, also women and children and even priests – **had all asked the local military authorities and the British for guns**. Most of their best guns the Cretans had given away to the authorities during the four-year the Metaxas Dictatorship.

Here is a characteristic passage from a novel **“Kritika Naklia - Manolas Narrates”**, 1976 Chania.....

« _____ π _____
_____ π _____ . _____
_____ (_____ 1903 π _____
_____ π _____ π _____) _____
_____ π _____ , _____ .
_____ , « _____ π _____ , _____ π _____
π _____ , π _____ π _____ π _____
π _____ , _____ , _____ π _____
_____ π _____ π _____ .
_____ . _____ π _____
_____ , _____ , _____ , _____
_____ π _____ π _____ π _____ .
_____ , _____ π _____ π _____ . « _____ π _____
_____ » _____ . « _____ » _____ « _____ π _____ » .
« _____ » _____ : _____ , _____ 1976.

A villager named Manolas recalls a conversation he had with his mother.....

“We were told by the police captain to hand in our guns, because our Country needed them! And those who had mules should give them also because they needed them in the Albanian front.

I had a short “Maliheri” (Manlicher from 1903, used during the Wars in the Balkans) I kept it like a doll, and I kissed it, ready to turn it in.

My old lady says to me: “Son, don’t give it away, because you never know how things will turn out and you might need it to fight the enemies”. I did not listen to her and I turned the gun in to the Police, and I regretted that much much more, than I did for my mule.

.....And a few months later, when the Germans invaded the island, we went to the village and we took our hunting guns and axes, and thick walking sticks, (_____) and run down to the valley, were the Germans were falling from the sky.

My “old lady” was walking behind me, carrying a small bag with munitions.“You were right I said to her! I shouldn’t have given my gun away to the police! “Hurry up and get moving” she replied, “...and stop talking!”

Meanwhile, the **Cretan Reserve Soldiers from the Albanian front**, namely those between 30 and 40 years old, who had managed to walk through the Northern front in Albania and make it back to the island, **instead of forming new military units** or at least join the already existing ones, **they were sent on a month’s leave and asked to go home to their villages**, where they were eventually confronted by the German invasion. (Even then the Metaxas Government, were afraid of “organized” Cretans.....)

“The truth was that the whole of the Cretan population wanted to fight”, adds the Supreme Commandant of the Allied Forces in Crete, the New Zealander, Major Gen. Freiberg: “I have no doubt that if we had the time, we’d be able to put together and train two complete Divisions”.

Similar is the picture described by Brigadier Soulsberry: ***“It was an amazing sight, seeing villagers of all ages begging for guns. The morale of the Cretans is impossible to describe!”***

On May 20, early in the morning, 400 bombers and 300 fighter planes took over the sky of Crete bombarding and firing in an unprecedented manner, followed by 500 transport airplanes with 8,000 airborne paratroopers, while 80 glider-planes were landing quietly, one after the other. **The Allied Forces, once they got over the initial surprise** caused by the sight of the thousands of airborne-paratroopers, **they rushed towards the spots where the enemies were gathering.** **From the very beginning of the invasion,** the villagers and other civilians suddenly appeared ***“one holding a half-rusted gun, the other holding a half-broken one, others with hunting guns, axes, and strong sticks”***.

Meanwhile, in the cities and towns, the Cretan people, ***“asked the Military Authorities for guns to defend themselves”***. Especially in the towns, the Greek and the British Authorities were having a difficult time to control the people. **Masses of upset civilians broke into the military warehouses in Chania and Heraklion, where they found significant stocks of guns and munitions,** despite repeated claims, that there were no guns to be found.

Meanwhile, ***“the villagers, with all kinds of guns and in groups, were making their way to the places where the enemy was”***. They often carried the guns of dead Germans or rushed to where German parachutes with equipment were landing, and returned to the battle, branding their newly acquired equipment!

Nikos Kazantzakis in his book ***“Crete, My Island”*** memorializes a characteristic conversation he had with a villager some years later after the war...

-“Immediately, as we saw the planes we shouted “Let’s get them”, we grabbed the guns and went.

-What guns? Kazantzakis asked, you had guns?

-You bet we did. Some had old rifles, others had knives and others had sticks. When a “sky-man” would fall, he would still be dizzy and we’d immediately attack him, kill him with sticks, with knives, we’d take all his equipment, and slowly we’d get our hands full with machine guns and revolvers.

In Kastelli Kissamou, in Floria, in Agrimokefala, and at the Kandanos in Selino Gorge, in Galatas, Aya and Alikianos of Chania, in Latzima and Pervolia of Rethymno, in Mastaba and Profiti Ilias of Heraklion and elsewhere, groups of armed civilians took part, not only in minor but also in major battles for ten whole days.

The resistance of the Cretan population caught the German by surprise! Especially considering that only the night before the invasion, the German troops were being reassured by their own Intelligence that they would be welcomed by the Cretans with “open arms”! (.....and Welcome did they find!!!)

And the Germans would claim later..... *“We grossly underestimated the power of the opponent”*, states the German Lieutenant General Scheirmer, *“As the English unfortunately had equipped the civilians of Crete, who were fighting wearing their Cretan costumes, something which is against all rules of war”*. A relevant German report characteristically states: *“The 16th Company of the Attack Regiment, who were ordered to protect the southern part of the Maleme airport, were constantly battling against the snipers”*.

And it continues: *“On the southern and the western part of the town of Heraklion an amazing battle took place against the snipers, who’d fight in groups of 7-8 men. One of them was led by a priest, who was later shot”*.

Indeed, **the active participation of many priests** and also that of the women in the battle was shocking to the Germans. Amongst them, stood out Archimandrite of Paleohora, Stylianos Frantzeskakis, who led his parishioners to Kandanos, with a gun raised in his hand.

In Rethymno, the **Australian Major-Gen Santover remembers a monk armed with an old gun and an axe fixed to his belt.** The following day the same monk showed up armed in the battle field, accompanied by a young boy who was carrying his war trophies, from which a Schmeisser German machine-gun stood out. When the **Greek fighters arrested Sturm**, Group Captain of the second Parachutist Regiment and surrendered him to the Australians, the German Officer complained to the Australian counterpart, Lieutenant Colonel Campbell, with the phrase ***“I cannot tolerate the Cretans, holding German guns and fighting the Germans”.***

In Crete, it was the first time that Germans had encountered resistance from the local population, men, women, even children. **The German reaction was swift.** Already during the battles, the civilians who were arrested carrying guns were summarily executed on the spot.

In the first six days of the battle alone, 200 Cretans were executed, not only those who were caught with guns in their possession, but also those who were caught in their villages when the German squad arrived. **The executions continued during the following months,** with the most severe on August 1st, when in one day 207 partisans were executed, in the villages of Alikianos, Fourné and Skine. **No one knows the exact tally of executed partisans and civilians, but it is estimated in the many thousands!**

The main effort of the Germans was concentrated in the area between Maleme and Souda Bay which, as it has been historically proven, is the key to either conquer or keep Crete. **The battle of Crete was essentially over on May 31st,** and from the next day onwards the

German Military initiated an organized plan of reprisals like no other whatsoever during the entire war! It was morning on May 26th, when General Freyberg “regretfully” informed Wavell that it was impossible to “keep” Crete.

During the tragic days that followed, while never underestimating the admirable action undertaken by groups of British or Greeks, **the main concern of the Allies was the safe assembly and embarkation of their troops on military ships to Egypt**, departing mostly from Sfakia or Heraklion.

This military defeat and the occupation of the island was only the first phase of the Battle of Crete however. The free-minded Cretan people, despite the severe losses, the destruction of the towns, the cruel inhumane reprisals, refused to submit. While Crete was falling to the enemy, with Lefka Ori and Psiloritis as the nucleus, begins the Resistance fight against the conqueror, which continued for as long as the war lasted, with the help of a few brave British and many Cretans, in concert with all Cretan people who would later pay dearly with their own blood. The attitude of the Cretan people dignifies and seals the fight for freedom and the inalienable right of the people to self-determination. The people of Crete once again became great protagonists in History.

Ultimately, the Germans paid a huge price for their success. The unpredictably heavy losses – over 4,500 dead and 350 lost planes- led to the suspension of any further invasions by air, until the end of the war. “The days of the airborne-paratroopers are over”, stated Hitler, congratulating General Student for his victory.

At the end, although the Battle of Crete by itself did not significantly alter the date of the invasion to the Soviet Union - *the fatal delay was the result of the stubborn resistance of the Greeks to the forces of the Axis - it deprived the Germans of valuable Air Force support which*

was badly needed at the initial crucial phases of the invasion to Russia.

The Battle of Crete has been characterized by the co-existence of violence and humanitarianism. The conditions set by the Geneva Convention for abiding to certain fundamental rules, during every war conflict, were often broken. The violent acts during the battles can perhaps be explained, however. The active armed resistance by the non-combatant Cretan people was experienced for the first time by the Germans. It was this that caused rage and panic to the Germans. The harsh reprisals towards non-combatant population, the mass executions after the occupation, in order to punish and terrorize the island's inhabitants, are acts that even today the Germans are ashamed of and apologetic for. Because no-one can deny the people the right to fight for their basic human values: personal freedom and freedom for all.

Not all Germans however were war-criminals. In the *Battle of Crete* the Germans paratroopers, fought with admirable bravery. The crosses at the German cemetery in Chania testify to the big losses!

Ladies and gentlemen, Historians will be discussing for many years to come whether Greece would be better off to remain neutral in the Second World War, or if the civilians should have participate in the Battle of Crete, or if the Resistance of the people – who gave all they had, without any conditions,- was a good policy, or not!

Yet at the time of the German invasion, the people of Crete did not have time for critical analysis! The soul of Crete awoke within them, that Crete of Revolutions and Sacrifices and the voice of their forefathers shouted out loud: *“St’armata -Rise and pick up your arms!”* The Heroic Resistance by the Cretan people against the Nazi invaders was in our time, the first occurrence of a people's struggle, a struggle that today has been legitimized. A struggle of an entire population, for its Freedom and Dignity.

The lesson of the Battle of Crete and the Resistance remains always relevant. **It teaches us that nothing in life is earned without unshakable Beliefs, Struggle, and Sacrifice, and that there are certain values for which if necessary, one must sacrifice even his own life!**

I will close with a Cretan Rizitiko song which says it all:

*“Hitler do not brag for setting foot on Crete
You found her unarmed, while her Children were away
They were away, fighting in Albania
Yet, they were still fighting for Freedom”*

And lastly allow me to recite the Cretan folk verse (mantinada) in Greek:

« _____ ’ _____ π _____
_____ π _____ »

*(“ I always like to walk on the paths of Psiloritis
For they have been first walked on by the Partisans of the Occupation”)*

Thank you very much.

###

It was said of the great English builder and designer Sir Christopher Wren, “If you seek his monument, look around you.” One can find monuments to the engineering contributions of Emmanuel Velivasakis in places far and near. From his evaluation and restoration of the United States Capitol Dome in Washington, D.C. to the design of mega-structures such as the world’s tallest buildings, the Petronas Twin-Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Taipei Financial Center in Taipei, Taiwan, to his emergency response work at the ruins of the 1999 earthquake in Istanbul, Turkey and the World Trade Center disaster site after the 9/11/01 terrorist attack.

Born in Crete, Emmanuel Velivasakis received his primary/secondary education on the island. After serving the Greek Army, he came to the United States for university studies,

receiving his Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in Civil Engineering from the City College of New York with high honors. He is a licensed Structural Engineer practicing in the US and around the world. He is a Managing Principal of the Thornton-Tomasetti Group, an internationally acclaimed Architectural-Engineering firm. In the academic arena, he served as an adjunct professor of Architectural Engineering at the New York Institute of Technology. With his local Parish at the Greek Orthodox Church of Our Saviour in Rye, NY, he has been actively involved with its Parish Council for nearly 18 years, including its President and Chairman of the community's Hellenic School.

His love for the land of his birth, Crete is evidenced by his active involvement with various Cretan-American Organizations since his early college days. He has served in many capacities both at the local and national levels. Currently he is serving as the National President of the Pancretan Association of America.

For his professional and civic accomplishments, Emmanuel Velivasakis has been awarded numerous distinctions and awards, including:

- Offikion of Archon Eftaxias of the Great Church of Christ, bestowed by His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
- "Gold Cross of the Order of the Phoenix" by the President of the Republic of Greece Hon. Constantine Stefanopoulos, 2004
- Gold Medal of the Polytechnic University of Crete, 2004
- Certificate of Appreciation by the City of New York for his service at Ground Zero, 2002
- Diamond Award, a.k.a. "Oscar of Engineering," US Consulting Engineers Council for his WTC role, 2002
- Diamond Award, US Consulting Engineers Council for the Istanbul Airport Seismic Modernization, 2001
- Silver Cup, awarded by the Greek Foreign Ministry for his WTC role at the Megaron Mousikis in Athens, 2002
- Silver Cup, awarded by Mayor of City of Athens Avramopoulos at Ground Zero, 2001

Emmanuel Velivasakis and his wife of 29 years, Orsa, make their home in Scarsdale, New York, along with their two sons Lefteris, 25 and George, 21.