

# OXI DAY AND VIGILANCE BEING THE PRICE FOR FREEDOM



**Freedom and the Australian Hellenic way.** As we approach OXI (OHI) Day, don't be surprised when you see Australians of Hellenic heritage congregating at a shrine, sanctuary or memorial. It is their way of paying homage to those who died so that we may live today. OXI Day has its origins back to the 28 October 1940 when the Greek Prime Minister Ioannis (John) Metaxas's soundly rejected the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini ultimatum.

However OXI day is not the only day that Greeks and Australians of Greek heritage remember those who died in battle. They also pay homage to their ancestors for the battles of Thermopylae, Marathon and Plataea alongside the battles of War of independence, World War I and II. To grasp the full significance of the homage to the fallen and its customs, one needs to travel back in time when the Greek people were emerging from their 500 years of oppression.



King Leonidas

**War of Independence.** Prior to the War of independence, many of the indigenous Greeks along with their northern neighbours, the Serbs, Albanians and Slavs fought for their freedom from oppression. In Greece, there were two categories in society under Ottoman rule. One working for their Ottoman overlords and the other comprising a conglomerate of Brigands, Pirates, Klephtes (Thieves) and Armatoli who roamed the countryside looting and pillaging one and all, no matter who they were.

Times were tough indeed and life in Greece for any traveller was fraught with danger if caught in the hinterland of Greece unescorted. Therefore it was no wonder that travellers during this period returned back home with wild tales of being robbed, assaulted and lucky to escape with their lives and clothes on their back. Philhellenes, inspired by romanticism, respect for the ancient Greek culture, glory and a taste of action, many an adventurer made their way to the Mediterranean in support of the Greek cause against the Ottoman and in the process lost their lives during the struggle. But they were not forgotten by the Greeks who like their ancestors of old, built shrines, sanctuaries and memorials to the fallen.

**ANZACS, Gallipoli and World War 1.** Prior to the Allies wading onto the shores of Gallipoli, the then Greek Government advised the allies that it was strategically foolhardy to force their way through the Dardanelles and the Hellespont. The Allies on the other hand still regarded Greece as a young nation whose influence in the affairs of the great powers was perceived as minimal and unfortunately their advice was ignored. This lack of understanding of the Greeks was to cost the Allies much. So much so that Australian and New Zealand soldiers who fought alongside each other lost their lives against a determined and equally determined enemy the indomitable Turk.

Thus it was against this hostile environment in 1914, the Australian Army imported donkeys with their Greek drivers as water carriers. The Greeks began to appear on Gallipoli carrying water and supplies to the soldiers at the front, using their donkeys as the means of transport. The program continued for many months until it was found that bringing water and supplies to the battle front was not strategically practical under battle conditions and therefore the program ceased. The donkeys (minus their Greek drivers) were not to be used until April 1915 as transport for the wounded.

It was then that men like Herbert Latrobe, an Australian would trudge to and from the battle fields collecting the wounded back to the dressing stations using the same donkeys as transport. These men were performing the tasks long before Simpson and his donkey came onto the scene. On the island of Lemnos, Greeks were also providing support at the hospitals that were to be found on the island. Many an Australian and New Zealander were cared and buried for under the Lemnos sky. Their bodies may lie far from home, but they still live on in the memories of Greeks throughout the world. Greeks don't forget the sacrifices made.

**OXI day and World War II.** Every Greek, military historian and those interested in the battles of World War II, cannot but be astounded by the efforts of a tiny country called Greece taking on the mighty axis powers. Up until then, the allies had not won any battle against the axis powers. The word laconic OXI, (OHI) meaning NO in Greek has a greater meaning in the Greek language and its significance to the Italian Ambassador meant much.

Like that ancient Spartan King Leonidas whose laconic response to the Persians at Thermopylae, said *Molon Lave*, (Come and get them). It is of interest to note that Australians of Hellenic Heritage have erected a statue of King Leonidas in the suburb of Brunswick, Melbourne Victoria. The memorial is in fact an Australian war memorial dedicated to the Greek and Australian Thermopylae battles in Greece and symbolise the battle for the Kokoda Track by the Australian diggers during World War II.

The Greeks surprised the whole world when they threw back the Italian high command and forced them to retreat back through high snow covered mountains of Albania. It was a fateful day for the Italian dictator Mussolini when he took on the small forces of the Greek nation, thinking fancifully that he could recreate the mighty Roman Empire and thus demonstrate his military prowess to his ally and co-conspirator, Hitler. Hitler was not amused by Mussolini's interlude into Greece and was forced to come to the aid of his ally and subsequently invade Greece. Australian and New Zealanders were rushed in support of the Greek nation and in doing so; many lost their lives fighting the Nazi invader alongside their Greek brethren, the soldiers and civilians alike.

Many an Australian and New Zealand soldier owes his life to a Greek during the occupation of Greece by the Italians and Nazis. Many who witnessed the atrocities that occurred died fighting alongside the Greeks in their struggle for survival in a world that was facing tyranny and oppression. Many Australian and New Zealand soldiers remember with fondness the warmth and support of the Greeks and one Australian soldier remarked that "the Greeks made us feel like one of them". This same soldier whose name was Henry 'Jo' Gullet ended up being Ambassador to Greece after the War.

The battles throughout Greece and Crete were no easy matter and every inch of ground was contested, even when faced with unsurmountable odds as in Crete by the Nazi elite parachutists. On the subjugation and end of hostilities in Crete, Hitler's Operation Barbarossa was delayed by some six weeks which eventually caused his defeat at the hands of the Russians. Like Napoleon, the ill-fated expedition into Russia by the Nazi machine ground to a halt by that unforgiving winter weather and the might of the Russian will and dogged determination. When the battles were over and peace reigned again over the Hellenic lands, life went on, but the Greeks did not forget those who paid for the price of freedom.

**Australia's Thermopylae. The Kokoda Track.** The 39th Battalion, an Australian Militia unit pitted against overwhelming Japanese forces on the Kokoda Track were the first to stop and delay them. Even though it was well led by its commanders, the unit lacked experience in Jungle warfare techniques, it was poorly equipped and supplied, against a superior foe who was intent on reaching Port Moresby. The delay was enough to enable 2/14th and 2/27th battalions to take part and stem the onslaught of the Japanese.

It is of interest to note that during the Papua New Guinea campaign on the 22 December 1943 near Japero, Dutch New Guinea an Australian of Hellenic heritage Corporal Angelo N. Barboutis, 31st/51st Battalion was killed in action trying to save his Aussie mates. Other Australians who had served in the Australian armed forces in the European theatre of war were also involved in the defence of Australia and some even ended up as POW alongside their Australian mates in Nazi occupied countries including Changi in Singapore and on the infamous Thailand – Burma Railway.

United Nations and Nato Police actions. There are few and far between in the western world that will be familiar with the Greeks serving in Korea under the auspices of the United Nations. Many served in the Infantry battalions alongside other United Nation countries including Australia, New Zealand, USA and Great Britain. Those that served had learnt their lessons well and were experienced battle veterans from the Albanian front against the Italians, World War II, and the Greek Civil War. The First and Third battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment were also serving alongside the Greeks in Korea, and thus the traditions formed at Gallipoli, Greece and Crete were carried on.

The Gulf war is another example of the ties that bind both countries. Although its opposition to Gulf war II, Greece did take an active part in the first Gulf war, as a means of restoring peace in the Persian gulf, after Iraq had invaded Kuwait. Greece support to NATO in Afghanistan has been sold since 2003 and undertakes 6-month command and training Mission rotation of Kabul. In the Balkans, Greece's special political and economic relationships with countries in the Balkans play an important role in reinforcing democratic development there.

Greece is also an active member in NATO's Ocean Shield counter-piracy operation providing protection for World Food Program chartered and merchant vessels off the coast of Somalia, and routinely contributes to NATO maritime operations. Therefore it is not hard to gather that Greeks like their Australian brother in arms will fight against tyranny and oppression to retain democratic freedoms that bind them.



**Vigilance is the Price of Freedom.** It is of interest to note that there has been an influx of Australians of Hellenic heritage serving in the Australian armed forces especially so after 1990 where it became apparent that the Australian Defence Force did not mirror that of the community. Thus a campaign was conducted throughout Australia to recruit men and women from non Anglo Saxon backgrounds into considering a career in the Australian Defence Force.

Records will indicate that Australians of Hellenic heritage have also served in Vietnam, East Timor, Iraq, Solomon Islands, Afghanistan, and many are still serving in all three services, the Navy, Army and the Air Force. Greeks and Australians of Hellenic heritage remember and pay homage to the dead and for their sacrifice and to keep the torch of freedom alive and outside the reach of tyranny and oppression. Those veterans who made Australia their home after World War II and the Korean War could be seen marching on Anzac Day alongside their Australian brethren proudly wearing their medals. They are now joined by the new generation of veterans who served in Vietnam, East Timor, Iraq, Solomon Islands, Afghanistan.

Therefore in future, whenever you see Australians of Hellenic heritage gathered together at a memorial, sanctuary, shrine or an event on a particular day, remember it is a Hellenic custom of remembering and reflecting on those who died in battle. Let the current and future generations know that Greeks and Australians of Hellenic heritage, like their Australian and New Zealanders brethren, do not forget that vigilance is the price of freedom. The Australian Hellenic memorials throughout Australia including statues like that of that Spartan King Leonidas in Brunswick Victoria who are silent guardians are reminders of those who did fighting for the freedoms we take for granted this day. Lest we forget. **Peter Adamis**