

## WHEN OXI IN GREEK MEANS NO



OXI or OHI whatever way you pronounce still means NO. On the 28 October 1940, one lone voice in the European wilderness, Ioannis Metaxas the Prime Minister Hellenic Republic took courage from his ancestors, the ancient Greeks and denied Mussolini of Italy the right of any free passage through Hellenic Territory. It was at a time when the Allied powers were desperately seeking a champion or a victory no matter how small against the axis powers comprising of Nazi Germany, a Fascist Italy in Europe and a belligerent Japan in Asia. Despite the Hellenic rejection, Mussolini unleashed the Italian Army against the tiny Greek nation through Albania.



The Hellenic response was ferocious, unexpected and with such deadly force that half a million Italian soldiers were forced to retreat throughout Albania. The shock of the Italian defeat created such a stir amongst their Nazi ally Hitler, who was concerned that the ill fated Italian sojourn in Greece was to have on his Plan Barbarossa, attack on Russia. In Early April of 1941, Hitler invaded Greece and thus relieved the pressure on Mussolini, forcing the Greek Army to retreat from the Albanian front as they were unable to sustain battles on two fronts. Despite Allied support that had been rushed to the aid of the Greeks, the Greek army surrendered to the Nazis on the 20 April 1941.



The Greek Army may have surrendered but its people did not give up hope and went on to aid the allied Army still in their midst until the end of WW2. Although it's debatable whether the battles against the Italians and Nazis in Albania, Greece and Crete played a major role in delaying Hitler's plans against Russia; military historians are in agreement that it certainly laid the foundations for the cruel and unforgiving Russian winter and its people to bring the Nazi aggressors to their knees.



Memories fade with time but we that grow old still remember the sacrifices of that tiny Hellenic nation who like David of biblical times stood up against not one but two Goliaths and shouted freedom rather than slavery. As such, its embedded within the Hellenic psyche that those of Hellenic blood or origins celebrate the 28 October every year to remember and commemorate the sacrifices of that tiny Hellenic nation, we all refer to as Greece. No matter where Greeks reside, no matter what country or customs they have adopted, one day of the year they can all stand proud in the knowledge that their countrymen and women stood against an aggressor intent on making them slaves. What is of interest is that the 28 October does not alone belong to the Greeks but to all individuals and countries that hold sacred the freedoms we take for granted this day. OXI day is for all mankind a perpetual reminder that without vigilance and sacrifice, freedom is but a word.





This year in the Domain Gardens of Melbourne under the shade of a Maple and eucalyptus tree stands the Australian Hellenic memorial dedicated to Australians and Greeks who served the respective countries in aiding each other against an aggressor intent on enslavement. Passer bys either strode or ran passed the gathering of about a 100 people each looking in the direction of the memorial wondering the significance of the gathering of people. Some stopped and listened along with their families to understand what it was all about. While at the Shrine of Remembrance, the Hellenic Flag stood proudly besides its brother in arms, the Australian flag reminiscent of 1941 when they stood side by side during the Battle of Greece and Crete.



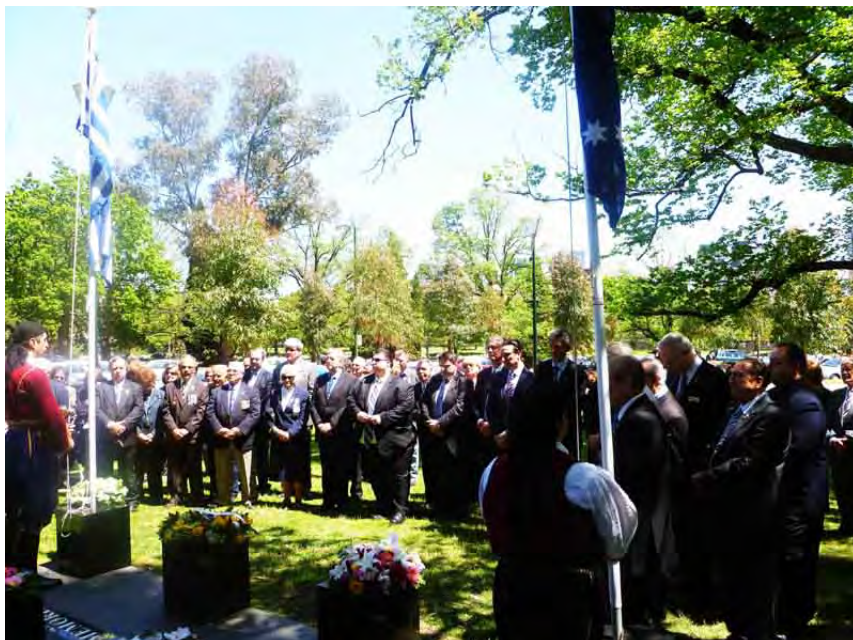
At the Australian Hellenic Memorial the Hellenic RSL of Melbourne and Victoria once again flew the banner for all Australians and those of Greek heritage to commemorate the 28 October. Under the leadership of Steve Kyritsis and his loyal RSL staff, once again lay wreathes on behalf of the fallen. The Master of Ceremonies was Emmanuel Karvelas, the Hellenic RSL Senior Vice President who coordinated the days activities. As in each case, the memorial was blessed by the Greek Orthodox priest, followed by a brief speech on what OXI Day meant and the laying of wreaths the many dignitaries from government, military and civilian representation.



Those dignitaries present on the day were: Mr Dimitris Tsilikis - Representing the Greek Consul General to Melbourne, Ms Eleni Lianidou, Mr Steve Kyritsis - President, Hellenic RSL Sub Branch, Mr. Leo Hammond - Representing John Geary Deputy Commissioner Department of Veteran Affairs, Mrs Galatia Samarias and Mr Stan Kayialikos - representing the Australian Hellenic Memorial Foundation, Mr. Andrew Katos - MP for South Barwon, Representing the Hon Nicholas Kotsiras Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, Mr Lee Tarlamis - MP Member for South Eastern Metropolitan Region, Representing the Leader of the Opposition, the Hon Daniel Andrews.

Mr Bill Papastergiadis - President Greek Orthodox Community Melbourne Victoria, Mr Martin Folley - MP State Member for Albert Park, Mr Spiros Robotis - President AHEPA Victoria and Olga Black, Mrs Malama Varvara - President Lemnian Community Melbourne Vic, Representing the ITHACAN Philanthropic Society - the President Mr Anthony Drakopoulos and past President Mr Peter Paxinos, Mr Arthur Tsouhantaris - President of New Democracy Victoria.

Mr John Kyritsis - Representing Omospondia Dodecanese Islands, Mr Andreas Ballis - Representing Silogos Halkidikeon Aristotelis, Mr Dimitris Varnas - President of Pan Ipirotic Omospondia Australia, Mr Kon Zagoritis - Representing the Maniates Association. Also in Attendance were the brother (Menelaus) and sister (Galatea) of the late John Anagnostis, one of the founding members of the Australian Hellenic Memorial.





The second part of the commemoration was the march up to the Shrine of remembrance by dignitaries and civilian participants. With a bright blue sky in the heavens the sun's rays on their backs and flags of both nations flying in the breeze, the marchers proudly strode up the shrine steps. Each silent and sombre in their approach as they encountered the final step they were met by the shrine staff who ushered them into the sacred area within the Shrine. Two shrine guards resplendent in their Military uniforms, sidearm's and 303 rifle, stood to attention as the procession slowly filed through the entrance and into the sacred area. Once again the Greek Orthodox priest blessed the shrine and its members followed by the laying of wreaths, and the playing of the Hellenic and Australian National Anthems.



With the completion of the official ceremonies, all members were invited to return to the Hellenic RSL for light refreshments, which in the words of Steve Kyritsis means a "full meal in Greek". On arrival at the Hellenic RSL in South Melbourne, it was like coming home again after an absence of some 15 years. The RSL members had made renovations to the kitchen, members area and the dining hall in the upper level of the building. Seated at the main table were the dignitaries while dotted around the room were RSL members., their families, friends and guests. One couple in their Salvation Army stood out amongst the others and after some enquiries it was found that they had also represented the 39 Niners association. A Band of men and women who had formed an association after WW2 as they were the first to take up arms and wear the uniform of Australia to go to war.



True to his word, Steve Kyritsis was not wrong about the refreshments being provided and one was please to see that the hospitality of the Hellenic RSL members was alive and well. They made our visit to the RSL a pleasant and enjoyable one. During the President's speech on OXI Day, Steve Kyritsis also made mention of those Australians who were currently serving in Afghanistan and of those there were elements that had their origins in Greece. Suffice to say Steve Kyritsis rightly stated that he was not at liberty to say name them but that he wished all Australians serving overseas a safe and speedy journey home. With the commemorations, paying of respects and speeches over, it was time again to return home and enjoy the day, safe in the knowledge that the sacrifices of two nations were not in vain. **Peter Adamis**

