

# Teenage sailor learns the horrors of war

I was born in Heraklion, Crete, Greece, on 22 April, 1922 and joined the Royal Hellenic Navy in 1938, aged 16. I spent my early years on the battle cruiser *George Averoff*. In October 1940, when the Italians attacked Greece, my ship was stationed at the port of Pireaus, where we remained until April 1941 when the Germans invaded Greece.

The entire fleet stationed in Pireaus was ordered by the Greek High Command to leave Pireaus and save as many ships as possible from falling into German hands. We sailed for Suda Bay, Crete, but arrived at the same time the German aerial attack on Crete commenced.

We were then ordered to join British ships forming up off the south coast of Crete. From there, we were ordered to make for the safe port of Alexandria in Egypt but, unfortunately, were not allowed into Alexandria and stood offshore before we steamed to the Sudan and from there to Suez.

We came under attack from the German air force while in Suez.

From Suez we sailed to Bombay, where we were based for some time, participating in tanker convoy protection to and from the Persian Gulf.

I was then transferred, along with other crew mates, to Newcastle in the UK to receive a ship that was lent to the Royal Hellenic Navy by the British Royal Navy. Our new ship, the Hunt Class destroyer *HMS Border* (L-67), was handed over on 20 July 1942 and commissioned as His Majesty's Hellenic Ship *Adrias* on 26 August 1942, under the command of Commander Loannis Toumbas.

We sailed to the Mediterranean to participate in convoy duties in January 1943. On 27 January 1943 we were north-west of Cape Finisterre, off the northern coast of Spain, when we engaged the German submarine *U-553* and sank her. About two weeks later, on 13 February 1943, we engaged an-

***Speros Vardos OAM tells of his extraordinary experiences as a young sailor serving in the Royal Hellenic Navy in World War II. He was invested with the Order of the Phoenix by HE Ambassador G. Zois on behalf of the Hellenic Republic in Canberra on July 13, 2008. His awards and decorations include: War Cross 2nd Class (Greece) awarded twice; Navy Cross (Greece); Campaign Medals: Atlantic Ocean (Greece), Indian Ocean (Greece), Mediterranean Sea (Greece), Normandy (France). He was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in 1991.***

other submarine, *U-623*, and sank her as well.

We took part in many convoy escorts in the Mediterranean as well as the Sicily landings. *Adrias* was the first ship into Augusta and Syracuse harbours in the Sicily campaign.

On the night of 20 July 1943, accompanied by *HMS Quantock*, we engaged three German torpedo boats. Two were sunk and the third was badly damaged, believed sunk.

On 20 September 1943, *Adrias*, representing Greece, along with three other Allied ships, accepted the surrender of the Italian fleet based in Taranto

## Bow blown off

During October 1943 we were participating in operations near the Dodecanese Islands. On 22 October, near the island of Kalymnos, we struck a German mine and the bow of the *Adrias* was blown off with the loss of 21 dead and 30 wounded. The flotilla commander on board *HMS Hurworth* ordered us to abandon ship. *Hurworth* was coming to our rescue when she hit a mine and sank, taking 143 crew with her. Although *Adrias* was badly damaged and had limited manoeuvrability, we did not abandon ship. Instead, we picked up the *Hurworth* survivors, including the commanding officer.

We headed for the Turkish coast at Gumusluk, where we buried our dead and made what repairs we could to make *Adrias* seaworthy. The remains of our shipmates were retrieved after the

war and returned to Greece.

On 1 December 1943 we sailed from Gumusluk to Alexandria, a distance of about 730 nautical miles. For about 300 nautical miles of the journey we were in range of German bombers based on Crete. We sailed mainly at night to avoid detection.

We reached Alexandria on 6 December 1943, St Nicholas' Day. St Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors. *Adrias*, in its badly damaged state, limped into Alexandria and was given an enthusiastic reception by British and other Allied ships.

All *Adrias*'s crew were transferred to other ships. I was transferred to *Adrias*'s sister ship, *Kanaris*, another Hunt Class destroyer on loan to the Royal Hellenic Navy. I was based in Alexandria for the rest of the war, undertaking Mediterranean convoy duty on various ships in the Royal Hellenic Navy under British command.

At the end of the war the remaining, original crew of *Adrias* was reassembled to sail the partially repaired ship back to the UK to return her to the British Royal Navy. With the cessation of the war, *Adrias* was not properly repaired and was eventually sold for scrap.

While I was on military service, my family back in Crete suffered very difficult times. My older brothers, Vasili and John, were both serving in the Greek armed forces at the time of the German invasion of Greece. Vasili, a veteran of the Albanian campaign, was in the army and John was in the air force. Both eventually made it back to

Crete many months after the German occupation of Greece was completed. Our youngest brother, George, remained in Crete with our parents and sister Marika.

In June 1944 German troops executed my father and many others in our neighbourhood because of their assistance to escaping Allied servicemen. In my father's case, the German authorities also knew that I was still on active duty. My mother and siblings buried our father in the back yard of our family home.

My family learned that *Adrias* had been severely damaged and that many crew had been killed. Fearing the worst, they held a memorial service for me. They subsequently received news, from Red Cross postcards I had sent, that I was alive and well and still on active duty in Alexandria.

I was discharged from the Royal Hellenic Navy in 1950. I was subsequently employed on the passenger ship *Kyrenia*, which was bringing migrants to Australia. After my second voyage to Australia I decided to stay.

On 25 November 1951, I married Kaitina Theodorakis, a young woman from eastern Crete, in Cootamundra, NSW. We had three children: Peter (1953), Maria (1957) and Nick (1958).

We initially lived in Melbourne. In 1955 we moved to Batlow, NSW, where we remained until we moved to Canberra in March 1968, where we reside today, with our children and their families.

My wife and I became Australian Citizens in 1961. Offices held: Past President and life member, Greek Orthodox Community of Canberra and District; Past President, Cretan Association of Canberra and District; Foundation and Life Member, Hellenic Club of Canberra; Honorary President, Hellenic Sub-Branch RSL (ACT). Life Member of the RSL (1993).

## Battles of mainland Greece and Crete recalled at memorial service

The memorial service for the 67th anniversary of the battles of mainland Greece and Crete was held at midday on May 24 at the National Australian Hellenic Memorial by the ACT Hellenic Sub-Branch RSL.

Political, diplomatic and defence force representatives of Australia, Greece, NZ, UK, Cyprus, European and World War II veterans gathered for the service.

The Greek defence forces were represented by Major General Daniel Sinanoglou, of the Hellenic Armed Forces, and Lt Commander Efstathios Kyriakakis HN. The official representatives of the Greek Government visited Wellington, Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne.

Among the official party laying wreaths were Major General Michael Slater DSC AM CSC, for the Chief of the Australian Defence Forces; NZ High Commissioner Dr John Larkindale; Colonel Roger Hooper, for the UK High Commissioner; and Major General Adrian Clunies-Ross for the Chairman of the Australian War Memorial.

Mr Antonio Papakosta represented



*The memorial service for the 67th anniversary of the battles of mainland Greece and Crete, held on May 24 at the National Australian Hellenic Memorial by the ACT Hellenic Sub-Branch, RSL.*

the Ambassador of Greece and gave the welcome address; Cyprus High Commissioner Mr Filippos Kritiotis accompanied Ms Karin Macdonald, who represented the Chief Minister of the ACT; Ms Annette Ellis MP represented the Federal Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Gary Humphries Senator for the ACT; Major General Bill Crews AO MC (National President) represent-

ed the National RSL; Mr Gary Brody OAM (ACT Branch RSL) was represented by Mr Bruce Tunnah; Mr Speros Vardos OAM represented the WWII veterans and Mr James Kathakakis represented the Cretan Association.

Other VIPs included veterans and widows of veterans of the Greece and Crete campaign, Frank Atkins, Les Cook, Keith Hooper, Mrs Alma Scott,

Norm Simper, Paul Taylor and Ron Metcalfe. Rear Admiral Simon Harrington (Retd) represented the Repatriation Commission; Air Cdre Peter Portlet the NZ Defence Group. Cdre Keith Robb, Wing Commander Stuart Brownlie, Lt Col Phillip Morrison, Lt John Sellwood and community representatives, Ian Cartwright of DVA also attended.