

THE LIBERATION OF GREECE IN 1944: 70 YEARS AFTER THE FIRST ALLIES LANDING ON KYTHERA



It is arguably the most iconic photograph taken on Kythera during World War II. On 15 September 1944 a young Emmanuel Sophios (who was later to etch his name in Kytherian landscape photography) crawled up a small hill overlooking Kapsali and took a photo of the British and allied landing craft, recording for posterity the liberation of the first part of Greece from Nazi occupation.

Seventy years later, we remember that landing and the events that led up to the Allies' return to Greece via Kythera.

The Allied command had established a strikeforce called Foxforce, consisting of the Scottish No. 9 Commando group; M Squadron captained by the Danish-born war hero, Anders Lassen; members of the British Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), a reconnaissance and raiding unit, and some units of the Raiding Support Regiment with 75mm guns and mortars. Foxforce also included elements of the SBS (Special Boat Section) and later some Sappers and 350 men of the Greek Sacred

Regiment. Lt Col Ronnie Tod was in overall command. On 9 September an SBS reconnaissance patrol that had landed on Kythera by parachute with the mission to destroy a German radar station, reported that the Germans had abandoned the island, so the Royal Navy decided to use Kythera as a forward base for operations along the Greek coast. Foxforce was assigned to defend this new naval base. Foxforce went ashore on Kythera on the evening of 15 September 1944.

The naval flotilla was led by the troop ship LSI (Landing Ship Infantry) Prince David (pictured over the page) and featured Canadian-manned ships. According to Lassen's diary, when the Foxforce forces landed at Kapsali the most fervent of the locals threw themselves into the water with their clothes on and swam out to the ship. People hung out of windows, and church bells pealed such was the rapturous reception.

A young Emanuel Comino was on Kythera at the time and his memory of that day is undiminished by the passage of time: *(continued over page)*

“I remember standing on the beach at Kapsali watching the British and Greek war ships and landing barges coming into the harbour. The barges landed on the beach and out came British and Greek soldiers hugging each other. I remember Greek soldiers kissing



the ground, with tears in their eyes and shouting homa ellinico ('Greek soil'). They were kissing old women, crying Manoula mou, Manoula mou ('My mother! My mother!').”

According to a BBC correspondent, British commando troops went ashore in assault craft in the last light of the day. They received a warm welcome from the inhabitants, who came by donkey and on foot to the shore to greet them and informed them that earlier they had watched 150 Germans destroy their radio location

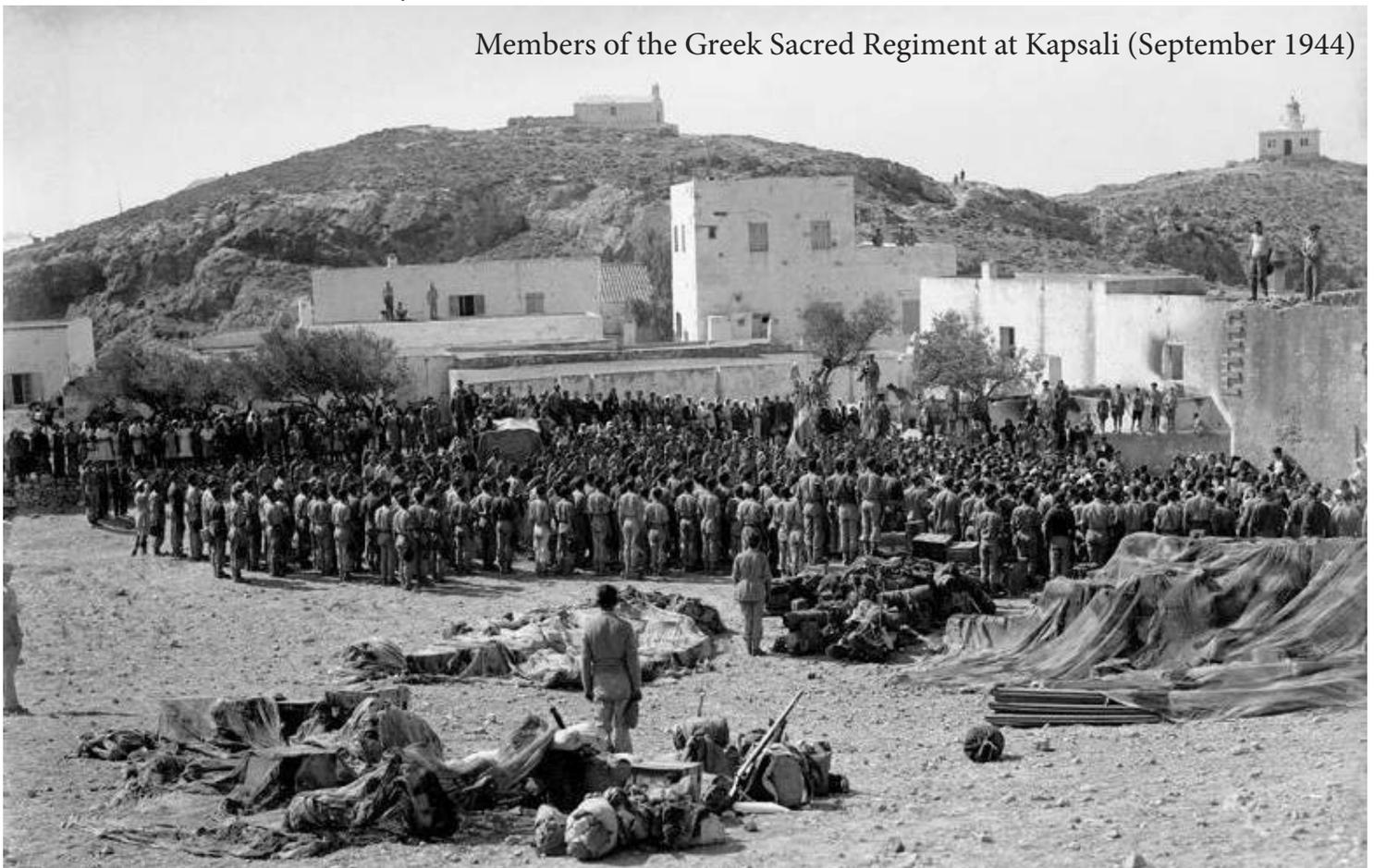
station and prepared to leave. The BBC correspondent reported that the German garrison of Kythera had led an unhappy existence:

“The men of the island fought them with stolen weapons; they burnt the boats in which the Germans were planning to get away; and even while the enemy waited on the beach the islanders shot at them.”

The story of this particular military venture has also been told in a movie film shot by the British Army Film & Photographic Unit (British Pathé) whose cameraman was on board one of the vessels that entered Kapsali. Vignettes from that newsreel (which is entitled 'Return to Greece') are reproduced at the end of this article. The film is now accessible on YouTube. They show the landing craft in Kapsali, the Allied troops receiving a warm welcome as well as ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army) partisans marching through the streets of Hora. The film was apparently first shown in Greek cinemas on October 16, 1944, two days after the German evacuation from Athens. As an interesting aside, the narrator, in a reassuring but somewhat patronising tone, (wrongly) remarks that the British officers at the Kastro are admiring an English-built castle (whereas it is clearly Venetian in style and age). Nevertheless, seventy years later we honour the bravery and valour of those soldiers who fought so valiantly for the defence of Greece and its eventual liberation from German oppression.

George Vardas

Members of the Greek Sacred Regiment at Kapsali (September 1944)



RETURN TO GREECE

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