

THE GREEK URN

“For, to men of renown all the earth is a sepulchre and not only does the inscription on their monuments in their own country testify their virtues, but even in a foreign land an unwritten record of the mind, rather than any monument, remains with every one forever.” From Pericles Funeral Oration

In the spirit of the Spartathlon and the Marathon, an ancient Greek Urn containing sacred soil from the graves of Australian soldiers buried in Greece was presented to Australia in a solemn ceremony at Canberra on Friday, 19th July 1946.

In the spirit of the ANZAC tradition, British and Commonwealth Forces answered the call for assistance from Greece in her hour of need. In a strikingly similar manner to the Marathon, Anargyros Stratigos brought from the Greek people the gratitude for the sacrifice of Australians killed in Greece during those dark days of World War 2.

This story emanates from two boxes – a box of newspaper clippings kept by ‘Beatty’ Psaros of Inverell and a box containing the Greek Urn in the Australian War Memorial at Canberra.

This story is enshrined in two places – The Phaleron War Cemetery in Athens, Greece, and The Australian War Memorial, Canberra, Australia.

This is a story of sacrifice in brotherhood by two peoples – Greeks and Australians.

‘Beatty’ Psaros collected news items from the Inverell Times during her life at Inverell and these were kept in a cardboard box. The news items were cut from the newspapers, often without an indication of their date of origin; a few as whole pages; a lesser number as complete newspapers. This box of newspaper clippings were of all things Greek in the community of Inverell from 1927 spanning over fifty years.

During a recent cataloguing of the contents in the cardboard box, the following news item, neatly cut out from an original edition of the Inverell Times emerged from bottom of the box amid a sundry of other clippings.

AUSTRALIAN GRAVES IN GREECE

Soil Presented to Australia

A great honour was bestowed on Australia last night when Mr. A. Stratigos, vice-president of the Australian-Greek League of Athens, presented the Prime Minister, Mr. J. B. Chifley, with an urn, over 2500 years old, containing Greek soil taken from the graves of every soldier who fell in Greece during the last great conflict. The function which was broadcast at 10 pm last night was accompanied by splendid speeches.

This the first time in the history of Greece that Greek soil has been given in such a manner. Such an act in ancient times has been considered an act of capitulation.

To-day, however, Greece has presented it to the Australian people whom it regards as a brother nation.

The Urn, which was consecrated in Greece in the presence of 1500 people, by Archbishop Damaskinos, Regent of Greece, has been in the National Museum for hundreds of years and is regarded as a priceless treasure. It will now be placed in the War Museum at Canberra, where it will hold an honoured place. Mr. Stratigos, who came especially from Greece to make the presentation has relatives* in the Inverell District.

Inverell Times 20 July 1946.

**Theo and Peter Psaros, Monterey Cafe, Inverell, NSW*

Anargiros Vassilios Stratigos arrived in Australia from Greece on the *Highland Princess* disembarking at Sydney, NSW April 1946. This followed an announcement from Athens, 26 February 1946, to ‘confer the Freedom of the City of Athens’ to the Australian Minister of External Affairs, Dr. H. V. Evatt. The diploma and a commemorative medal for Dr. Evatt were taken to Australia from Athens by Mr. Anargiros **Stratigos**, vice-chairman of the Athens Greek-Australian League.

Mr Stratigos, a special envoy representing the Greek Regent, Archbishop Damiskinos presented a letter to the Prime Minister of Australia, the Rt. Hon. Ben Chifley, an ancient Greek urn containing soil from the graves at Phaleron War Cemetery of Australians killed in action during 1941 in Greece and an illuminated address from the professors and students of Athens University to the universities of Australia thanking them for the aid given to Greece.

This presentation was made in the office of the prime minister at Parliament House Canberra on Friday 19 July 1946 in presence of a delegation including Dr. Vrisakis the Consul General for Greece; Rt. Rev.

Timotheous Evangelindis, Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church of Australia and Mr. Arthur George, the president of the Greek community in Sydney.

Mr. A. Stratigos, vice-president of the Australian-Greek League of Athens, who came from Greece specifically to make the presentation, told Mr. Chifley that this was the first time in history that Greece had presented **Greek** soil to a foreign country. "Such an act from ancient times has been considered an act of capitulation," he explained. "To-day, however, Greece presents it to the Australian people, who it regards as a brother people, and it is a small gesture and symbol of her gratitude and friendship towards Australia."

Mr. Stratigos, when presenting the **urn**, made his speech in the **Greek** language and was translated into English by Mr. A. T. George, a Sydney **Greek** lawyer. When he made the presentation, Mr Stratigos said: "This is a piece from the holy body of Greece, which the Greeks have ever denied to other races. But they now offer it to a brother people, Australia, as an official token of the most sacred and unbroken ties of unity." He said, "This is a token of ever- lasting- friendship between two peoples. It is an expression of ever- lasting gratitude of the **Greek** people to the Australians who died on **Greek** soil. Greece will never forget the co sacrifices of the Australians." Mr. Chifley, speaking on behalf of the Australian people, said Greece had done Australia a signal honour.

Warmth of friendship had existed between the two peoples long before the war and the war itself had cemented that friendship. "I can only hope that the sacrifices made by your people will have their benefits and that calm will be brought back to them at an early date," Mr. Chifley added. "The **urn** will remain a treasure in the archives of the Australian people for ever or as long as the **urn** itself in the passage of time will last." This priceless **urn** and the sacred soil from the graves of Australian soldiers now repose in the Canberra War Memorial, where the Prime Minister (Mr Chifley) placed it, after receiving it from Mr Stratigos. It was a gift from the people of Greece to the people of Australia.

At the time of writing the Greek Urn and its sacred contents are in a box, in storage at the Australian War Memorial Canberra. It is hoped that this Greek Urn will be placed on permanent and public display in the near future at the Australian War Memorial Canberra.

A DEDICATION

"In that rich earth a richer dust concealed."

The Soldier - Rupert Brooke. 1887-1915



The Greek Urn – Photo - Deanna McCarthy 2011

To the Australian Service men buried in the rich earth of Greece, the 168 Australians buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, and the 323 Australians with unknown graves recorded on the Athens Memorial, Phaleron, Greece, also 141 Australian burials at the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, Suda Bay, Crete.

Researched and written by Author Peter C. McCarthy Inverell NSW 2012

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