

Greek American Commandos of World

By Steve Frangos

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It was the first, and only time, a foreign flag had flown with Old Glory to lead a formation of American troops. Proudly marching behind the Greek and American flags, the 122nd Infantry Battalion, commonly known as the "Greek Battalion," passed in review before President Franklin D. Roosevelt and various high-ranking military personnel. It was April 24, 1943, Camp Carson, Colorado and as the New York Times reported, the day was filled with "spectacular demonstrations" such as the use of the new "secret anti-tank rocket gun, dubbed the 'bazooka,' which knifed a projectile through two inches of armor plate." As Roosevelt waved his hat high over his head and spoke here and there individually to the troops, we will never know what he thought as the Greek Battalion gallantly passed in strict formation. This all-volunteer unit composed of a mix of Greek Americans and Greek nationals was founded in January 1943 via an executive order issued by President Roosevelt, himself. These men had joined this special Battalion to fight on America's behalf to free Greece of Axis occupation.

Nothing was what it seemed. When the Greek Battalion's commander Major Peter Clainos had received his orders to take command of this newly formed unit he was told something none of the others in the Battalion knew at the time. As Clainos, revealed, decades later, "When I was briefed by the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. before going to Colorado Springs, I was told the Greek Battalion in American uniforms would never go to Greece. No American unit would be allowed in the Balkans because it was the British domain."

If that was the case, then why,



times rally on their own. On April



Greeks of the 122nd Infantry Battalion at Camp Carson, Colorado, on occupation of their native land. This all-volunteer unit contained a mix of

form this special unit at all? Logically, we are only left with the assumption that Roosevelt, ever the consummate politician, was being expedient with the social forces and political pressures at home as well as those abroad. Fighting alone the small nation of Greece was the first to stop the Axis juggernaut. The Greek War Relief Association was raising millions of dollars in relief supplies, Red Cross aid and these same Greek immigrants consistently proved to be among the most successful war bond salesmen (and women) in the entire nation. On that day in early spring, none of these Greek soldiers, so smart and precise in executing their formations, realized they were little more than political pawns.

ically or mentally unfit and kept only those who proved they could withstand the rigorous training.

The second reason was even more significant. Given that Clainos knew the Pentagon would never allow any American unit into Greece or the Balkans given that they were in the British sphere of influence he worried the battalion would be sent to the Pacific. Clainos explained it this way, decades later: "By the time we completed our training and received assignment to a regiment, it would have been too late for the European Theater. We would have been sent to Japan. I couldn't visualize Greek nationals, who had suffered atrocities under the German occupation, putting on their belt and their bayonets to fight the



Major Peter Clainos

Yet, these very same Greek American soldiers had a destiny, no president or general could have foreseen.

Uncertain of where this battalion might be deployed, Clainos set a vigorous training program to eliminate the unfit and train the rest for any contingency. It was Major Clainos who was responsible for not allowing the 122nd to build up to battalion strength. He later said this was done two reasons: first, he was not satisfied with the physical and mental condition of many of the Greek nationals who were older and not physically able to compete; many had been forced to join the battalion because they were Greek immigrants. Clainos discharged the phys-

Japanese on the other side of the world. It was not my job to decide where the Greek Battalion would go; it was up to the Pentagon".

Still Clainos was particularly worried some of the Greek nationals who had been promised to return to their homeland to fight the Nazis might desert in protest. He was also concerned the Greek Battalion would set a bad example for all of Greek America if there were desertions. Mainstream America would neither understand nor excuse the desertions and would not bother to learn about the political ramifications of the Balkans agreed on at the Teheran Conference by the three Allied powers, the United States,

War II: Behind-Enemy-Lines in Greece



v to avenge the brutal invasion and Greek Americans and Greek nationals.

Britain, and the USSR. This was 1943 and Greeks, among the last immigrant groups to arrive in America, were second-class citizens in most parts of the country.

Major Clainos continued the intense training, biding his time, eliminating soldiers who were not physically fit and keeping the battalion from reaching its maximum strength; U.S. battalion strength of 1100 men. This negative became a positive because the quality of Clainos' battalion improved with every dismissal. Clainos continued to remove the undesirables until fortunately a group from the OSS arrived on the scene and asked for volunteers.

By September 1943, after roughly seven months of special training,

teered must speak Greek fluently, be in top physical condition, and realize that their missions would experience a projected ninety to 95 percent casualty rate. The OSS personnel had come to the camp expecting they would get some 10 to 12 volunteers. As Clainos tells the tale, once he placed that prospect to the Battalion, he and all of them immediately volunteered for duty.

The OSS men accepted some 160 men. In early October 1943, these Greek American soldiers arrived at the Congressional Country Club just outside Washington D.C. Once at this luxurious location, they were made to live in tents on the club grounds. By this time, these men were known, in military jargon, as the Greek American Operational Group or Greek/OGS for short. Space does not allow me to describe but only outline the kind but not the full scope of the commando training these young Greeks were given which included but was not limited to hand-to-hand combat, knife throwing, extensive training in explosives, and in time paratroop training.

After this intensive training, these men were moved again to a remote camp near Hagerstown Maryland for more demolition training. Clainos was not among their number. This was never explained to him although some mention of his politics was made. Years later Clainos said, the saddest moment in his entire life, was watching the buses filled with those young Greek American soldiers drive away without him.

On December 23, 1943, this Greek American unit boarded a troop ship and two days later left for Egypt. On January 23, 1944, 185 men (16 officers and 169 men) landed in Egypt the group at this moment in time was known as Third Contingent, Unit B. The later and now official name of this group became Company C 2671 Special Reconnaissance Battalion which was not given sometime in August 1944.

Here I would like to draw directly

groups of our unit split up in Egypt, January 1944. Three of our groups then operated in Yugoslavia while the other three went directly into Greece. After five months of combat by some in Yugoslavia, our six groups were reunited in Greece where each group was operating autonomously.

Now, all six of our Greek American groups of the Greek/USOG were operating behind enemy lines in Greece, disrupting Axis garrisons, convoys, and trains.

We did not discover the great extent of the damage these small groups inflicted on the Germans and Bulgarians in Greece (or on the Germans in Yugoslavia) until our records were opened by the CIA in 1989. Unfortunately, our records re-



April 1943. Family bid Andrew goodbye in Salinas four days after induction. L to R: Grandma Caredis, Andrew, Cousin Leo Malliaris, Mother Susie, Cousin Sophie Cominos, Aunt Helen Cominos, Cousin Marie Cominos and Cousin Bessie Cominos.

mained top secret until then."

For 219 days continuously from April 23 to November 1944 these Greek commandos were behind the

the Greek Battalion, numbered at approximately 600 individuals. Even after such a short time the Greeks had earned a reputation within Camp Carson as a crack unit. It is said that word of this reputation had reached all the way to Washington.

The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was formed as a wartime intelligence agency with General William Donovan as co-coordinator in July 1941. In August 1943, OSS personnel visited Camp Carson and Major Clainos. Two things happened simultaneously: the Greek Battalion was disbanded and the OSS requested volunteers to fight behind the lines in Greece. Those who volun-

upon Andrew S. Mousalimas' especially fine account, "Greek-American Operational Group Office of Strategic Services (OSS): Memoirs of World War 2" (www.pahh.com). Aside from his own experiences Mr. Mousalimas has spent decades speaking with others in the various units and combing the National Archives for records on the Greek Battalion and the 2671 Special Reconnaissance Battalion. Now, be aware, other memoirs by other members of this elite unit exist and each is unique in its own way and deserves our close attention since, as we shall see, the various units operated independently of each other.

As Mousalimas reports: "The six

lines totally on their own. On April 23, Group I. Captain Verghis, commanding went to Epirus landing in an undisclosed location by sea. On May 16, Group VII Captain Andy Rogers, commanding parachuted into the northern Peloponnesus. On May 1, Group V Lieutenant George Papazoglou, commanding went to the region near Mount Paikon by sea. On June 18, Group II Lieutenant John Giannaris, commanding went to Roumeli, with a base about 25 miles southwest of Lamia. On July 16, Group VIII Captain Ronald Darr, commanding went by sea to Macedonia near Vermion. On July 19,

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