

More Than They Were Given

By Steve Frangos

From the War of 1812 and onwards, trustworthy accounts document Greeks as soldiers in the service of the United States of America. The observance of Memorial Day 1997 is a time to recall the first visible presence of Greek American soldiers in US military units. The self-styled "Phalanx Units" of Greek doughboys in the First World War believed that Greek national aspirations and world events were both being served in the frontline units of the American expeditionary forces in Europe. While Greek immigrants and their children distinguished themselves in armed conflicts long before and after the First World War, this worldwide conflagration marked a new beginning for the Greek community in the United States.

Greek American Doughboys

When the United States Congress declared war on April 6, 1917, Greeks were among the very first to answer the call. A declaration published in the Greek American newspaper *Loxias* presented the common cause: "We are, as a race, Greek, and will remain so, but America is our country, America is our home, our estate, our family, our church, our education, and everything we possess, therefore, it is our holy duty to fight and protect our country which is our life"

in the Balkans and the American in France. The involvement of the United States in the First World War was seen by many Greeks as directly aiding their Hellenic nationalist project.

The Boston Lecture

On such a blisteringly cold day in January 7, 1917, only a historian such as Seraphim George Canoutas (1874-1944) would have chosen the Old South Meeting House of Boston to present a lecture to an American audience on the Greeks in the United States. Canoutas spoke from the lectern where those Americans, taken with the "Greek fever" of the 1821 Greek War of Independence, first pledged their fellowship, aid, and very lives to the cause of Greek Independence.

when there were only around 100 Greek communities in the country. Local press releases in Chicago claim that \$2 million of this figure was raised in that city alone. These news releases went on to pose that the Chicago Greeks subscribed on the average of \$167.83 per capita, which was said to be the highest of any other ethnic group.



The May 5, 1918 edition of the *New York Herald* ran a photograph of two lead-

ing Liberty Bond salespeople -- Madeline and Constantine Ringa -- in costume. Madeline had an American flag wrapped around her, a pointed cap also made from the flag, and yet another flag in her right hand; Constantine was in a Greek costume holding a Greek flag. The accompanying caption read: "As small but as stalwart a team of Liberty Bond salesmen as could be found anywhere in the whirl-

won the admiration of all his comrades by his courage and contempt for danger; led his comrades to the conquest of a trench which was defended with energy and which was captured along a distance of 1500 yards after several hours of bloody combat....Starting out in the above attack with his comrades...Kornies saw them all killed or wounded around him. Undaunted even by this, he crawled from shell hole to shell hole, reached the trench, hurled his grenades among the German defenders, and forced the remainder to take refuge in a deep dugout. He immediately blocked the entrance...about 100 Germans, survivors of the entire company which had held the position...were ultimately captured."

Kornies had already received the French War Cross, with several palms. For this last action he was awarded the *Medaille Militaire*. On learning that the American army was to arrive in France, Nick Kornies made formal application for transfer to the Expeditionary Forces. Not all Greek Americans were as fortunate in combat as Nick Kornies.

Highest Price

George Dilboy was born in Alatsata, Asia Minor on February 5, 1896. His family immigrated to Keen, New Hampshire soon after the Balkan Wars. During the American-Mexican border troubles of 1916, Dilboy joined the National Guard, serving in Company H, First Infantry Regiment. On July 25, 1917, Dilboy was drafted and assigned to Company

(February 7, 1917).

Theodore Saloutos (1910-1980), the recognized "dean of Greek American history," posits that 60,000 to 70,000 is a reasonable estimate of the number of Greeks who served in World War I. This means that nearly one out of every four Greeks then residing in the United States served in the nation's military. Saloutos is quick to note that this estimate "does not include the many thousands of others who worked in essential war industries and in various other ways served the civilian needs of a nation at war."

Megali Idhea

The transformations which took place within the Greek American community, beginning in 1917, must be understood against the backdrop of Greek politics at the time. Greek communities throughout the United States were sharply divided between the supporters of Eleftherios Venizelos (1864-1936), Greece's then prime minister, and the reigning monarch, Constantine I. While both individuals favored the unification of all Greek people, and so the restoration of lands lost to the Ottomans, the exact means by which this goal was to be accomplished, and under who's direction, divided these two powerful figures and created a schism that reached as far as the Greek diaspora of the US.

Many Greek Americans had returned to their homeland to fight in a series of wars -- the Greco-Turkish War, the First Balkan War, and then, the Second Balkan War -- on behalf of this national goal. Many young Greeks served in the two armies of the Greek

In the English-language section of Canoutas's volume *Hellenism in America* (1918), "Present Greek Contribution," we find an

amended version of this lecture. As one would expect, Canoutas was quick to note the growing numbers of Greek American doughboys. Among the many soldiers cited, we actually see photographs of two brothers from Boston, Sergeant Speros Demeter (Demetrakopoulos) and Sergeant George Demeter, then "somewhere in France." Speros, who was attending Harvard when war was declared, volunteered and left with the fabled First Harvard Unit.

Being a community publicist, Canoutas also took the occasion of his Boston lecture to mention the Greek immigrant veterans of the American Civil War, the war with Mexico and the Spanish American War. Canoutas even spoke of the regret John Christy, a Civil War veteran, expressed that he was not, "younger to fight under Old Glory for the world's safety."

Home Front

Experts estimate that, in terms of direct costs, American involvement in the First World War, brief as it may have been, cost \$41 billion not including loans to the Allies. The Liberty Loan Bond Drives raised \$14 billion worth before the close of the war in November 1918.

By May, 1918, Greeks in the United States were credited with purchasing approximately \$10 million in liberty bonds. This was at a time

Sergeant George Demeter

wind windup of the third loan campaign...[T]hey account for the diversion of about \$10,000 of N.Y. citizen's money into Uncle Sam's coffers." By the end of the war, Greek immigrants had purchased Liberty Bonds totaling as much as \$30,000,000.

Forgotten Legionnaire

One Greek American doughboy certainly deserves special attention. On January 3, 1918, United Press Staff Correspondent W.S. Forrest, then on the battlefield with the French army, wrote of this individual: "Nick Kornies, 24, today the most honored and most decorated living American volunteer in the famous French Foreign Legion, an unscathed veteran of all the Legion's terrific battles during the past three years and a half, wants to continue the struggle with the American army....[He is o]f Greek parents born in New York, and an American citizen. Kornies was seen by New Yorkers selling bananas at the corner of East 23rd Street and Avenue B when the great world war began....There was blood of the ancient Greeks in the veins of the dark-haired young banana seller, for all the wraith of his uncle and all the love of a black-eyed maiden in the Greek colony couldn't stop him from making his way to France, where he joined the Foreign Legion in August 1914."

The young fruit vendor found himself in one particular incident: "Kornies (Nick) Legionnaire, 11th Company de Marche, Foreign Legion elite grenadier; 20th August 1917,

H, 103rd Infantry, 26th Division, and sent to France.

His citation for action taken in the Belleau Woods of France reads, in part, as follows: "For gallantry and intrepidity in action above and beyond the call of duty near Belleau, France, July 18, 1918. After his platoon had gained its objective along a railroad embarkment, Private Dilboy, accompanying his platoon leader to reconnoiter the ground beyond, was suddenly fired upon by an enemy machinegun from 100 yards. From a standing position on the railroad track, fully exposed to view, he opened fire at once, but, failing to silence the gun, rushed forward with his bayonet, fixed through a wheatfield toward the gun emplacement, falling within 25 yards of the gun with his right leg nearly severed and with several bullet holes in his body. With courage undaunted he continued to fire into the emplacement from a prone position, killing two of the enemy, and dispersing the rest of the crew."

Dilboy was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. In a public ceremony, in the presence of thousands of people, his father, Antonios Dilboy, was presented with the medal. George Dilboy's remains were taken from France to his birthplace at the end of the war. In 1922, after Turkish troops defiled the grave, it was moved to the Arlington National Cemetery. Today the George Dilboy Memorial Plaza at Hines Veteran's Hospital in Maywood, Illinois, has a 40 foot marble statue of this young Greek doughboy.

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Postwar Life

The war brought unexpected benefits to the Greek veterans: many finally received their United States citizenship, special allowances were made to foreign-born citizens in terms of bypassing quota restrictions so that prospective wives would be allowed into the country, and on a personal level, these men gained in terms of self-esteem as American veterans.

The Greek American veterans even had their own theme song; In July, 1919, Marika Papagika (1890-1943) recorded "Eletheria" (Freedom), (Columbia E5187). Set to the music of George M. Cohan's classic "Over There," in Greek lyrics it speaks of the taking back of Constantinople from the Turks and putting the Greek flag atop the of Aghia Sophia.

While the full territorial aspirations of the *Megali Idhea* were never realized, neither was life for Greeks in North America ever the same after 1918. Experiences on the home front with the Greek community organizing on behalf of Liberty Bond drives and the Red Cross changed the self-understanding of innumerable immigrants. The enduring pride expressed by the Greek American veterans was well-deserved and hardwon. A permanent place in America, not initially envisioned by the majority of Greek immigrants, through the fire of a world war became an unexpected reality.

church, our education, and everything we possess, therefore, it is our holy duty to fight and protect our country which is our life!