

reek Battalion

Unravelling the Story Of of a Special Group Of Greek Americans

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

CHICAGO - The Greek Battalion that was created by the United States during WWII is a fascinating but little known part of the history of the Greek American community. When an important portion of the history of a community is written by outsiders, its members have a duty towards future generations to seek and publish the facts before all the participants are gone.

The experiences of the men who made up the Greek Battalion have little to do with the official histories we now have to read. There is a great divide between lived experience and the artifact we call history. As such there is a critical difference between an eye-witness account and an official history. For the official academic the construction of a history is a very self-conscious product. It is never the real and actual events merely transferred sequentially to paper. Perhaps no better example exists in all of Greek American Studies, of the enduring fabrication of history, as the case of the Greek Battalion.

To be sure, several individuals who served in the Greek Battalion have written of their direct participation. For the moment these personal accounts consist of Kosta Kouvaras with his two books "Photo Album of the Greek Resistance" (San Francisco: Wire Press, 1978) and "O.S.S. with the Central Committee of E.A.M." (San Francisco: Wire Press, 1982). Next, John Giannaris' account (with McKinley C. Olson), "Yiannis" (Tarrytown, New York: Pilgrimage Publishing, 1988) offers yet another view on the behind-the-lines fighting in Greece. Most recently we have Andrew Mousalimos' extensive account, "Greek-American Operational Group Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Memoirs of World War 2" (www.pahh.com). We owe much to these men and their published ef-

Continued on page 5

The Greek Battalion: Recovering the Story

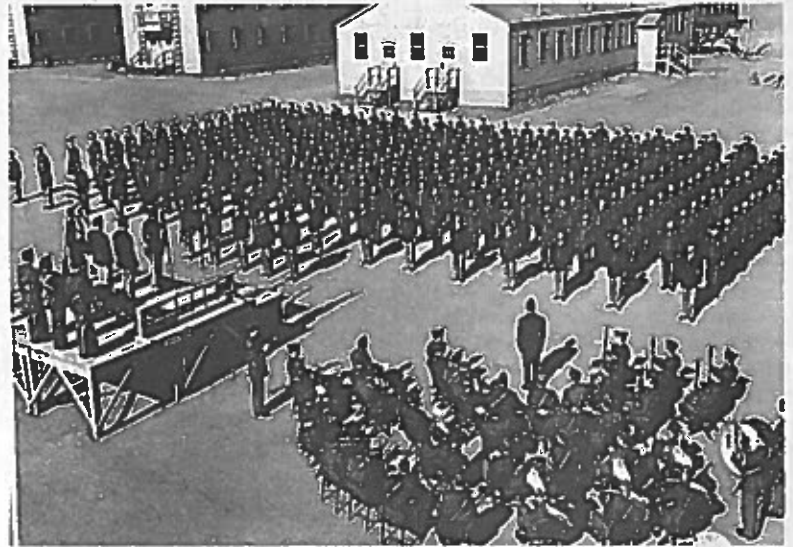
Continued from page 1

forts deserve our close attention.

Official accounts are political positions. Consequently, all official histories are political tracts influenced in one manner or another by the dominant forces operative behind everyday life. Far from a conspiracy theory, a close reading of documents issued at the time the events took place is one way to discover this ongoing reality for one's self.

For those readers new to this moment in Greek American history we need only refer to James Chimbidis,' National Herald article, "The Greek Battalion: Gallantry Under Fire":

"In January of 1943, the United States Army's 122nd Infantry Battalion was formed at Camp Carson, Colorado. Founded by executive order of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Greek Battalion was designated



Camp Carson, Colorado. The nucleus of the 122 Infantry Greek battalion at the conclusion of the battalion commander's talk, circa 1943.

as the 122nd Infantry Battalion to commemorate the 122 years since Greece had gained its freedom from the Ottoman Turks. It was the Greek Government in exile in Cairo, Egypt which had requested a Greek operational Group, the idea probably stemming from Greek Prime Minister Emanuel Tsouderos.

The plan was to train the Battalion in the summer of 1943 to be ready for deployment behind enemy lines by late September of 1943. About 1,200 men reported for duty at Camp Carson, Colorado. All but eight of the officers were Greek Americans. The Battalion was primarily composed of Greek Americans and Greek nationals. Of the 1,200 men who originally reported for training, many were not fit for combat duty and were sent home. The strength of the



involved in a complex Allied military operation: "Under battle flags of the United States Army five foreign legions of men with bitter memories and abiding hatreds are training to fight for the liberation of their homelands. Norwegians, Greeks, Filipinos, Austrians, and Japanese man the foreign battalions already established by the Army, but scores of requests from men of other "lost lands" for formation of additional units have been received by the War Department (January 20, 1943 Indiana, Pennsylvania)."

The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was keenly interested in the average Greek American's opinions. Domestic spying was a daily factor of World War II on the American home front. Those interested in learning more about how the Foreign Nationalities Branch (FN) "monitored the activities of 35 immigrant groups in the United States, including Greek Americans. Its reporting covered foreign politicians seeking refuge and support here, as well as the views and activities of landed immigrants, and second and third generation Americans" need only consult Elias Vlantou's four-part presentation of a select number of the declassified Greek documents in his series "Documents: The OSS and Greek Americans (Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora Volume 9 issues 1-4)."

Drawing on a document not in Vlantou's fine selection of declassified documents we can now get something of a backdoor look into

cently released statements concerning the Battalion to the Greek-language press. Readers of the press thus gain the impression that the Battalion is not entirely an American affair, and they view with distrust the possibility that American youth may be used as a political spearhead for the re-establishment of monarchy in Greece.

A fear similar to that expressed by Ahepa has been expressed also by liberal Greeks who are not American citizens, particularly in circles closely associated with the Greek daily National Herald of New York, edited by Basil J. Vlavianos. For Greeks and Greek-Americans alike, this anxiety represents long-standing difference between Greeks in this country and the representatives of the Greek Government. Greek-Americans generally resent the tendency of the diplomatic representatives of Greece to consider them still subject to direction from the Government of Greece. Last year, for example, Ambassador Diamantopoulos failed in part in his attempt to establish an all-inclusive National Greek Committee because Greek-Americans felt that he was going too far in his wish to keep a hand upon their affairs.

Greeks of Liberal Party belief, both in New York and in Washington, have also expressed the fear that Colonel Demetrios Xenos, who is reported as due shortly to become Military Attaché at the Greek Embassy, will try to use his influence, along with that of the Ambassador, to make a politi-

Major Peter D. Clainos of N.H. commander of Greek Battalion

proposed Battalion never exceeded 650."

The formation and existence of the Greek Battalion was never a secret. The Greek-language press universally praised President Roosevelt's announcement on December 10, 1942, of the formation of a Greek Battalion (Chicago Tribune December 13, 1942). Editorials, feature length articles and even the sustained visits of Greek reporters to the camp are all a part of the American as well as Greek American press of the mid-1940s.

"First All-Greek U.S. Army Unit Must Learn English As It Drills," is the headline in the Gallop Independent's story on the Greek Battalion. As this article clearly relates, "The 122nd Infantry battalion is composed entirely of Greek nationals and Greek Americans, the first unit of its kind in the United States Army... The battalion is the newest at Camp Carson—only three months old—and already its men are asking for action in the Balkans and hoping to be the first fighting unit to reach the shores of Greece (May 8, 1943 Gallop, New Mexico)."

As we hear in the Indiana Evening Gazette that the Greeks were in-

stood the politics within the Greek American community. DeWitt C. Poole sent the following report marked 'Secret' dated December 30, 1942 but it was not declassified until sometime in February 1985. It is offered here in full and unedited.

"MEMORANDUM FOR COLONEL DONOVAN:

The Order of Ahepa, leading Greek-American fraternal organization, is reported to be much concerned over possible political use of the Greek Battalion projected for the American Army. The Ahepa is extremely influential among Greek-Americans in the United States, so much so that an official expression of opinion from it may be taken as fairly representative of Greek opinion in this country.

It should be noted that the members of this organization are all American citizens. They pride themselves on being Americans first and always, and it is natural that they should look with distrust on the possibility that a Greek Battalion should be used as a political instrument by the present Greek Government-in-Exile, with whose past and present ideology many of them have little sympathy. Fear in the present instance has been aroused by the fact that the Greek Government, through its Embassy and through its Consulates, has re-

They call attention to the fact that he was closely associated with the dictatorial government in Greece, and that undue interference from him, or from Mr. Diamantopoulos, might create with the Battalion a problem as embarrassing as that of the Austrian Legion."

The memorandum is initialed by DeWitt C. Poole. A handwritten note at the bottom of this memorandum reads: "All of the above is known to the State Dept."

As we learn in the New York Times problems within all the foreign battalions was based on politics. In "Army Grows Cool to Battalion Idea," we learn that the Austrian Battalion was deeply opposed to the presence of Archduke Otto von Habsburg within their ranks. The Austrian Battalion volunteers were collectively composed of a mix of Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Hungarians, and Austrians who all feared the Archduke would try to reinstate Habsburg rule after the war (January 9, 1943). In this same news report the fears Greeks around the nation had voiced are also clearly noted: "Meanwhile political elements have crept in. For example, many Greeks are reported to believe the Greek battalion was instigated by the Greek Government in Exile, to which the largest Greek society in this country Ahepa, is opposed

7 of a Special Group of Greek Americans

because it dislikes the monarchy."

When Greece was invaded and finally occupied by German and Italian forces Greek refugees quickly began to straggle into the United States. Among the stranded merchant seamen, journalists, merchants and ordinary citizens were a motley crew of Greek government officials. While the exact circumstances and individuals are not generally named in existing Greek American historical accounts (although you can read all about them by name in the FN documents) it is acknowledged that a number of these refugee officials approached various Greek American organizations claiming that as elected Greek governmental officials they should be immediately placed in charge of all Greek American war relief activities and organizations. These individuals were completely ignored by the Greek American com-

the official reason the 122nd battalion was ultimately dissolved. That no one raises the issue that the American Intelligence Community had a political position is part of the confusion of the interests of the state with the interests of the individual. There is no 'state' really just state officials who serve special interests. Who benefited by making these decisions is also a facet of official accounts that is never raised.

Behind the scenes of public awareness in October 1943, the Office of Strategic Services asked for 160 volunteers from within the

of all out war.

It couldn't be that official government agencies serve their own purposes at all times and under all circumstances - and the general public be damned.

What is present in every report public or classified is that the Greek American community rallied like no other during World War II. Such was the leading role Greeks played in the war bond drives that the Treasury Department allowed Ahepa to sell war bonds with its name prominently stamped on all bonds they sold. I have seen such bonds, never cashed



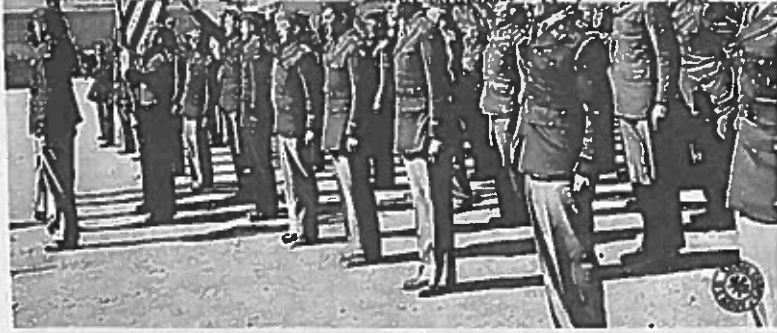
as the 122nd Infantry Battalion in

munity at large. How individuals within the American Intelligence Community viewed these individuals is still unclear.

As we learn in Andrew S. Mousalimas' memoir, Major Peter Clainos, commanding officer of the Greek Battalion, had very specific orders. As Clainos reports "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. By the time we completed our training and received assignment to a regiment, it would have been too late for the European Theatre. We would have been sent to Japan. I couldn't visualize Greek nationals, who had suffered atrocities under German occupation, putting on their belts and their bayonets to fight the 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."

Naturally enough no volunteer in the Greek Battalion ever knew what Major Clainos had been told by Pentagon officials until Andrew and Mary Mousalimos interviewed him in his San Francisco home "during different sessions in 1989-1991."

After nearly a year of rigorous mountain training the Greek Battalion was disbanded in late 1943. To this day, 'political reasons' remains



Greeks of the 122nd Infantry Battalion at Camp Carson, Colorado, vow to avenge the brutal invasion and occupation of their native land.

Greek Battalion. The volunteers had to speak fluent Greek and be in excellent physical condition. Everyone in the Greek Battalion volunteered. So was born Unit B of Company C of the 267th Special Reconnaissance Battalion which was composed of seven operational groups each consisting of two officers and 24 enlisted men. Today anyone can read of the valiant exploits of these daring Greeks and Greek Americans. After World War II however they were individually told not to disclose any information of their actions. And so for nearly fifty years these men and their singular contributions to the war effort were silenced by American government officials. Search as I might, I have never learned what national security interests were served by ignoring the undaunted courage these young men displayed behind enemy lines in time

in, and still held by proud Greek-Americans with the Ahepa circle in blue upon them.

Wars are won in the will. The singular fundraising and propaganda efforts led by the average Greek American in small towns and major cities all across the United States is an unparalleled history, yet to be written. As we can now see from the government's own declassified documents, American operatives such as DeWitt C. Poole or Wild Bill Donovan weren't about to tell the average Greek American or any average American citizen any more than they needed to know.

Good thing our government officials, now, practise complete disclosure in all foreign policy decisions.

Readers interested in contacting Mr. Frangos are welcome to e-mail him at grecianmon@yahoo.com