

DAD GOES TO WAR

1945-1950



BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1924, Dad is the second of the two sons born to Elizabeth Hondros and John Karmogiannis at Titani, an agricultural hamlet, located at the foothills of Mt Killini, near Kiato, Greece. It was in Titani, that Mum (Dina Kalliniotis) and Dad went to school, socialised, fell in love and married at the age of 19 years.

Dad worked at the family farms producing mainly commercial products of olive oil and dried currants. He vented his passion for music by playing the lute and clarinet at social occasions throughout the Corinthian region. He was reputed to be one of the best musicians in the traditional Greek style.

More often than not public recitals became a source of family income rather than an artistic expression. This was especially the case in 1953 when he basked at the neighbouring cafes to save our family from starving.

During the 1950's Australia had embarked on an extensive immigration drive. Dad had the 500 drachmas per person required to pay the Greek Government for the privilege of leaving the country.

Immigration officials twice turned down Dad's application to leave for Australia. Although he had the 2,500 drachmas to pay the Greek government, Australia wanted labourers and Dad's hands were too soft. As he was an employer and musician, he did not qualify. Eventually his persistence to leave behind family conflicts was rewarded and we left for Australia in 1955.

It was a trip from hell in an almost unseaworthy ship called the 'Kyrinia'. After three months, we landed at Melbourne. I was 8, John 7 and Liz 3.

From the Melbourne hostel camps, we embarked on a train for Greta Camp, near Newcastle. Dad was employed as a labourer and machine operator with BHP where he worked three shifts until he retired at the age of 63.

Dad often played his clarinet at Greek dances and on Sundays to entertain us and teach us Greek dancing and singing. He also played the clarinet on special family occasions to entertain his children and grandchildren.

Mum still lives in Newcastle, Australia with her family of three children, Maria Charlton, John Karmogiannis and Elizabeth Davias and 11 grandchildren. My daughter is Carmen Charlton, Liz's sons are George, Peter and Paul, and John's children are Katrina, Dinah, Stefani, Gina, Joanne, Nikki and Jason. Sadly, Dad passed away in Newcastle February 28, 2004.

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The Greek Civil War (December 1944 - January 1945 and 1946-49), was a two-stage conflict during which the Greek Communists unsuccessfully tried to gain control of Greece.



DAD AS AN EVZONE

October 1945, at the age of 23, Dad was conscripted to the army during a Civil War that saw Communist Greeks fighting against Nationalist Greeks for control of Greece. Dad's participation was not a political statement but an act of duty in defending the country he was asked to defend.

For the first eight months Dad was a guard at the King Paul's castle. He was part of the elite Greek infantry called evzones. So my father wore skirts, an honour reserved for taller men with great legs.

After eight months Dad was released from the army to go back to Titani and to his wife who had given birth to me. This respite lasted 22 months during which my brother John was born. After this break, Dad was recalled to the army and posted to Grammos Mountain.



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DAD AT MT.GRAMMOS

During the 1946-49 stage of the Greek civil war more than 50,000 combatants died in conflict, and more than 500,000 Greeks were temporarily displaced from their homes by the fighting.

In January 1949 General Alexandros Papagos, the respected commander of Greek forces at the beginning of WWII was appointed field marshal, a newly created post within Greece's armed forces. By mid-year, government side gained victories against the Communist forces. A split between the communist countries assisted these victories.

By August 23-30 the final act in the blood-soaked Greek Civil War was played out in the twin mountaintops of Grammos and Vitsi, near the Greek-Albanian border. At Grammos, Dad was one of the 50,000 men in the final campaign that pushed the communist guerrillas out of Greece.

As the communist guerillas fled north to Soviet-bloc countries they forced the civilians from the occupied villages to go with them. The landmines planted by the communist guerrillas in the mountain forests were cleared 50 years later, making Grammos an eco-tourism paradise.



At Grammos, his commanding officer placed him in charge of munitions and that saved him from the slaughter of the 5 Battalion that occurred at Gorgopotamos River. The Gorgopotamos Valley comprises a series of fast flowing streams, which drain of Mount Grammos that is situated on the Greek/Albanian border.

This was a mad 22 months as Greeks fought Greeks, Communist Greeks surrendered to the Monarchists and Monarchist defected to Communism. Dad said that Russians had provided the guns for the Greek Communists and these were of superior technology to the army weapons.

There was an occasion where a brother fought for the Monarchists and a sister for the Communists. Two months before the war ended the sister crossed the river reuniting with the brother.

At the beginning, December 1949, John was two years old and I was three. Outside the house, snowflakes were dancing as we pressed our noses on the windowpane. Almost in symphony, we started singing out, 'Dad, come home!' Neither of us had any idea what our father looked like. Unannounced, he walked in, looking imposing in his army uniform. We thought it was our last moment on earth and made a mad dash for a hiding place. It took much coaxing and offer of sweets for us to come out to tentatively greet him.

Dad was totally exhausted, especially by memories of killing young male and female guerrillas. He requested and received a 32-day family leave.

Early in 1950, Dad once again reported to the district army headquarters at Corinth. He then took a train to Athens and arrived just in time to hear the victory bugle.

Before he returned to his family, Dad's commanding officer offered him a supervisor's job at his Corinthian-based orange juice factory. He was impressed by his practical skills especially by his hunting prowess. On a two day hunting trip Dad killed three rabbits. Urged by a yearning to be near his family, he returned to Titani. The following year, Liz was born, the only one of the three of us born in peacetime.

Four years later we embarked on the long sea journey to Australia. Dad promised it would be only a two-year trip. Once we arrived, the opportunities in a new country beguiled and captivated all of us.

