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Movie gives life to little told tale of WWII heroism

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In the stirring new documentary film "The 11th Day," an old woman in black talks about the pretty colors falling from the sky on a day in May.

Then, she was a young girl hiding in an olive grove, when the bombing of the Greek Island of Crete finally stopped. Villages and cities had been ruined. Survivors were trembling and afraid.

Suddenly, the sky cleared. The silence was audible. She looked up.

"I was only 15," says Kaliopi Kapetanakis, remembering sitting in the olive tree while talking to a friend. "Oh, I said, 'Look. The whole sky is full of umbrellas.'"

They weren't umbrellas. They were parachutes, carrying more than 8,000 of Adolf Hitler's elite paratroops, the Fallschirmjager, the Sky Hunters. They were the tip of the German spear.

Hitler's plan was to take Crete, protect his southern flank and then quickly turn his attention to the east, to the invasion of Russia. With the Greek army decimated in Albania, the operation was to take only a day or so. His war planners didn't take into account the will of the Cretan people.

"They started ringing the bells," George Tzikas, a veteran of one of the most successful resistances in history, says in the film. "The church bells. Freedom! Save the city! Stop the Germans! And men and women, children, with no equipment, we stopped the advance."

They confronted the Germans with whatever they could grab. They lunged at the Fallschirmjager as they hit the ground, gripped by a terrible and desperate rage. Not only the men, but also the women and the children.

"We did not have many guns," Manolis Paterakis says through his white beard in the film. "Still, we went to fight, women and men, children, young and old. They went with hoes. They went with stakes. With anything we could find."

Of the 8,100 German paratroopers who jumped out of their planes that day, 3,764 were killed. Another 1,600 were wounded. What was left of the elite German paratroops was never used as the point of the spear again.

The French Resistance has been chronicled, and the Dutch, the Polish and others, but what happened in Greece has been less trumpeted.

If you're interested in what fuels an insurgency--and the news is full of that today--you'll want to see this film.

Funded by San Diego Chargers owner Alex Spanos, "The 11th Day" is about the children and adults who fought. They tell it in their own voices, in translation, with film footage illustrating how they harassed the Germans for years.

The Germans did not build schools or encourage democracy. Instead, they responded by burning entire villages in reprisal. The survivors were ordered to dig mass graves and then were put into those graves. Priests at funeral processions were gunned down by German soldiers, as were women and boys and girls.

The barbarism prompted a backlash, and captured Germans were slaughtered. There were more reprisals, and ditch after ditch was filled. Crete, which only 45 years before had been washed in blood during the uprising against the Ottoman Empire, was washed in blood again. In World War II, France fell in a week. But Crete never surrendered.

"There was fear, no question about that," Tzikas, then a young soldier, says in the film. "But that fear brought anger. Let me tell you: The iron that was coming down, and the fire made the Cretan heart harder than the German steel and the Cretan spirit hotter than the German fire. And when they came down, May 20, 1941, the Cretan people were ready for them."

His eyes are full of pain and pride while on the screen farmers rush into the fields where the paratroopers were falling. The villagers wear long boots and run across the hard ground, clutching farm tools.

One of the farmers holds a short hoe, on a handle about three feet long. They used what they had. Then they stripped the German dead of their guns and used those.

The resistance fighters organized themselves. They worked with British commandos to pass intelligence to Allied commanders.

One of the more fascinating parts of the film is the story of Patrick Leigh Fermor, the British intelligence officer who lived among the Cretans and helped organize a stunning coup: The capture of the German commanding general who later was smuggled off the island for interrogation. The guerrillas had German uniforms, but they did not have the proper insignia for the mission. So the Cretan women embroidered the necessary insignia.

The guerrillas wanted the German general's head on a pike, but Fermor protected him.

"Why is something relevant today that happened 60 years ago?" director Christos Epperson told me. "It is one of the great untold stories of World War II. It is a story that has been buried for too long."

"The 11th Day" will be shown at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday and again on Thursday at the Pickwick Theater in Park Ridge. Tickets are \$10. For more information, go to www.crete1941.com or call 800-791-2858.

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