

MOVIES

For Sacramento brothers, making '11th Day: Crete 1941' was personal

By Dixie Reid
BEE STAFF WRITER

In May 1941, more than 8,000 elite Nazi paratroopers descended on the Greek island of Crete in the largest airborne attack ever attempted by the German army. Crete fell in 10 days, but its determined people never surrendered.

On the 11th day of the German occupation, the Cretans began fighting back – with hoes, scythes, sticks, whatever they could fashion into a weapon – in a courageous act of civilian insurgency that lasted until near the end of World War II.

Their story of espionage and sabotage against the Nazis is detailed in "The 11th Day: Crete 1941," an independent documentary made by Sacramento brothers Christos and Michael Epperson, whose family members were among the insurgents. It will have one screening in Sacramento, on Saturday at the Crest Theatre.

"It's our history," says director Christos Epperson, 33, who notes that the Cretan civilian resistance movement has long been overshadowed by the French and Dutch resistances. "It's been passed over for so long, and now the torch has been passed to the next generation, to document it and carry it forward."

The brothers interviewed 35 elderly veterans of the insurgent fighting, including former British intelligence officer Leigh Fermor, who instigated the capture of the Nazi commanding general and hadn't spoken of it publicly for more than 50 years. Fermor, at first reluctant, went on to recall the gutsy abduction in detail.

Filming for "The 11th Day" took place on location in Crete and at a ranch in Wheatland, 30 miles north of Sacramento, where creek beds and stone walls are reminiscent of sites on the Greek isle. The brothers employed 400 extras, some of whom portrayed their own ancestors in dramatic re-enactments, often paying them with food, drink and gas money. In addition to re-enactments, they also used vintage photographs and footage.



Christos Epperson directs the World War II Greek resistance documentary "The 11th Day: Crete 1941."

Michael Epperson, 37, the film's writer, had an urge nearly 20 years ago to turn his family's story into a novel. But by the time he began his research, all of the great-aunts and great-uncles who lived through the Battle of Crete and its aftermath had died.

So, following Christos' vision and longtime dream of making a movie, they began work on "The 11th Day," which was built on the memories of veterans of the resistance fighting.

Michael Epperson, who

teaches philosophy at California State University, Sacramento, may still someday write about their great-aunt Eleuthera Xirouhakis, a heroine of the resistance. A statue of her stands on the grounds of a church in Aroni, Crete. Her story does not factor into "The 11th Day," but the brothers dedicated their film to her.

"She was 21, 22 at the time," says Michael Epperson. "She was a spy for the British (which had a small force of intelligence officers on the island), working for the Germans at a radio-transmission facility. She pretended to be a collaborator but copied down German communiques to give to the British."

Eleuthera, whose name means "freedom" in English, had been engaged to marry a young man from another village, something arranged by their parents. But in an act of

**The 11th Day:
Crete 1941**

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Saturday
WHERE: Crest Theatre,
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HOW MUCH: \$10
INFORMATION:
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MOVIES

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Resistance fighters in Greece during World War II pose for a photograph that appears in "The 11th Day: Crete 1941."

'Crete'

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defiance, she broke it off and soon fell in love with someone else.

On the day of Eleutheria's June 1943 wedding, Nazi forces stormed her family's home and confiscated the maps and radios they were hiding for the British.

"The supposed groom had rattled out her entire family," Michael says. "They were arrested in one fell swoop and sent first to a prison camp on Crete, where they were beaten. My aunt was the first female spy to be executed by the Germans. Her last words were, 'Long live Greece.'"

Eleutheria's four siblings were sent to Nazi concentration camps, where they remained until the war's end. They came home just as surviving family members, convinced they were dead, planned a memorial service for them.

The youngest of the Xirouhakis children, Dimitri, eventually moved to Sacramento, where his sister lived. Helen Xirouhakis Dokimos, Christos and Michael's maternal grandmother, had settled here with her husband prior to World War II.

Dimitri opened a cabinet shop in Sacramento. Christos remembers how careful his great-uncle was to hide the ID number tattooed on his arm at the Dachau concentration camp. As a boy, Christos was curious about the tattoo.

By age 11, he was asking his

family about the war, about Crete and his relatives' role in the resistance against the Germans. His interest was further piqued when, at 16, he visited Crete with his mother and brother, and saw that craters from German bombs still pitted the landscape.

"It was a chapter completely overlooked by history," Christos says. "The war has been told from the German and British points of view, but the Cretan side, this movie is the first time it's happened."

The brothers co-produced "The 11th Day" (Stockton developer and San Diego Chargers owner Alex G. Spanos is the executive producer), and Christos was one of the cinematographers.

He's escorting the film on a lengthy tour, showing it one time in each of 57 cities, in seven countries. He hopes to acquire a movie-distribution deal and have "The 11th Day" in theaters nationwide by May, the 65th anniversary of the start of the Battle of Crete.

A question-and-answer period will follow Saturday's screening, along with an auction of props and memorabilia used in the movie.

"I've always been a World War II buff, and like most Greek Americans, I grew up hearing the stories that the people of Crete fought to give Hitler his first bloody nose, in a battle lost to civilians," Christos says. "It's time to let the stories of what these veterans did in World War II be told."

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