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**REPORT 4**  
(1215/52/IM)

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## **PILGRIMAGE TO CRETE 2006 – MAYOR’S REPORT**

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### **1. Purpose of Report**

To report back on the Mayor’s trip to Crete in May, leading a pilgrimage to commemorate the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Crete.

### **2. Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Strategy and Policy Committee

- 1. Receive the information.*

### **3. Background**

Wellington and Hania, Crete, have had a sister city relationship since 1984. The relationship celebrates the contribution of the Greek and Cretan communities to Wellington, and the strong links formed between the two cities since World War II.

2006 marks the Year of the Veteran in New Zealand and the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the epic Battle of Crete. In May 2004 the Mayor of Hania, His Worship Kiriakos Virvidakis, visited Wellington to attend the Annual Commemorations of the Battle of Crete. During his visit, he extended an invitation to veterans of that battle to visit Hania.

A special relationship developed between New Zealand and Hania during the war – the area was the scene of some of the fiercest fighting between New Zealand and German troops during the 1941 Battle of Crete. And the assistance provided to Anzacs by the Cretan people both during and after World War II has long been acknowledged by New Zealand veterans.

In response to Mayor Virvidakis’s invitation, a Steering Committee was set up in 2005, to facilitate the New Zealand Veterans return to Crete in time for the 65<sup>th</sup> Battle of Crete Commemorations. The committee was headed by John Petris, Harima Fraser and Angelo Papageorgiou who put nearly a year’s work into organising the three week trip, and who worked tirelessly throughout the trip to ensure the veterans were kept well and rested and that everyone was included in every event and activity.

The Pilgrimage to Crete 2006 was launched in October 2005 and it was decided as a symbolic gesture to dedicate a memorial in the village of Sklavopoula in South Western Crete.

#### **4. Discussion**

*“Of all the battles in which New Zealand troops have fought, the unsuccessful defence of Crete has perhaps been the most dramatic. For 12 days in May 1941 a mixed force of New Zealand, British, Australian and Greek soldiers tried to prevent the island falling to the invading Germans, whose onslaught began with an airborne assault on a scale never before attempted. In the intense fighting that followed, the glider-borne troops and parachutists who led the German assault were decimated. But they gained a tenuous foothold and gradually won the upper hand, and the battle ended with the evacuation of the Island’s defenders.*

*“Crete became a German target because of the rapid defeat of Allied forces on the Greek mainland in the previous month. German forces had launched their thrust into the Balkans on 6 April 1941, quickly defeating Yugoslavia and outflanking the Greek border defences. The men of 2 New Zealand Division, New Zealand’s main contribution to the Commonwealth war effort in the Mediterranean, had been among those who had confronted the invaders in Greece.”*

***- A Unique sort of Battle edited by Megan Hutching ; with Ian McGibbon, Jock Phillips and David Filer ; foreword by Helen Clark.***

In preparation for the pilgrimage, the above excerpt is from one of three books I read on the Battle of Crete.

The pilgrimage included Battle of Crete veterans, whanau of veterans who fought in the battle and those who have had an ongoing interest in the stories of this battle. Nine veterans made the pilgrimage and there were 55 of us in total on the trip from all over New Zealand.

Each of the veterans had a caregiver accompanying them (one of whom was a doctor), as they were aged from 85 to 92, and they were variously children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews. The rest of the group was made up of children and family of other veterans who were returning to Crete to understand the stories they had heard about their relative’s experiences in the war.

We were also accompanied by the current President of the Maori 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion who was a veteran of WWII, although not of Crete, and a representative from Te Puni Kokiri. The Honorable Annette King represented the Government at the Battle of Crete Commemorations on 20 and 21 May.

By necessity, the trip was structured at a slow pace to match the veterans' mobility given their age, so there were only one or two outings or functions arranged each day to give them time to rest and recover.

## **Athens**

Our first stop was Athens where we spent three nights. During our time there we attended three cocktail functions. The first was hosted by the 'Griwis' – Greek Kiwis now domiciled in Athens; the second by the New Zealand Ambassador to Italy and Greece and the New Zealand Honorary Consul based in Athens; and the third by the Mayor of Athens.

We also met with the Foreign Minister for Greece, who was the Mayor of Athens during the Olympic Games and whose father comes from Hania and is a former Prime Minister of Greece.

We laid a wreath in Constitution Square and visited the Commonwealth War Graves enroute to Piraeus, where we had a small commemorative service and laid poppies on all the New Zealanders' graves.

## **Crete**

Crete is one of the largest islands in the Mediterranean and throughout history has always been seen as strategically important. It was originally the home of the Minoan culture with their wonderful palaces at Knossos, which were probably inundated by the 100 metre high Tsunami created as a result of the eruption of Santorini in circa 1650 BC.

Since then, Crete has been invaded by the Venetians who first built Hania as the Venice of the South, the Turks and of course the Germans.

The Cretan people live on an island made of limestone, riddled with caves, steep and coarse which is covered in vines, olive trees, orange groves and lots of goats and sheep. The Cretan people are strong, friendly, independent and hard-working.

## **Hania**

We arrived at Suda Bay via an overnight ferry from Piraeus on 19 May. Suda Bay was where the allied troops disembarked after retreating from the Germans on Mainland Greece in 1941. We were then taken to Hania where we attended a flag-raising ceremony in which the Greek, British, Australian and New Zealand flags were flown. We then attended the opening of a photographic and memorabilia exhibition on the Battle of Crete at the Maritime Museum.

We were hosted at various functions during our time in Hania by the Mayor, the Nomark of the Prefecture and the Deputy Mayor of Hania.

Hania had the added advantage for me in that it's Wellington's sister city and any opportunity to meet with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor and/or officials from Hania allowed us to talk about the strengthening of our relationship and the strong ties between our communities; to reminisce with the Mayor about his visit to Wellington in 2004; and to talk about ongoing opportunities particularly around educational exchanges which the New Zealand Ambassador to Italy (responsible for Greece) and our Foreign Affairs are keen to pursue.

While we were in Hania, we had daily bus trips including:

- A visit to the Commonwealth War Graves;
- Sfakia where we laid wreaths and remembered the large number of allied troops who managed to be evacuated to North Africa from there;
- Kandanos where an entire village was executed in retaliation for the killing of German soldiers;
- Paleochora where we had a wonderful meal at a restaurant called Oriental Bay, owned by two former Wellingtonians;
- Visits to a number of smaller towns that had hidden escapees including New Zealanders throughout the duration of the war;
- A visit to Maleme and Galatas to see where New Zealand troops saw some of the fiercest fighting of WWII and were forced to retreat from over the White Mountains to be evacuated to North Africa.

## **6. Conclusion**

I wish to thank Council for agreeing to me leading this pilgrimage to Crete. It was an honour to represent Wellington and to accompany the pilgrims. It would have to be one of the most moving experiences I have had as Mayor. To be able to listen to the stories, to participate in the ceremonies, to be with both the veterans and their families, as well as the families of those veterans who didn't return home, was a very special privilege.

*Kerry Prendergast, Mayor of Wellington*

## Appendices

- Link to view television coverage of the pilgrimage:  
<http://tvnz.co.nz/cda/tvnz/search/?style=tvnz&search=crete>
- Maps of Hania and Crete
- Print media coverage of the event
- Email and letter from two other trip participants

## Appendix One

## Appendix Two

## Appendix Three

## Appendix Four