



The great fire of Kastellorizo, 6 July 1944, as captured by British serviceman W.E. Benyon-Tinker.

Kastellorizo's Great Fire by Nicholas Pappas, Sydney

The recent re-publication on social media of W.E. Benyon-Tinker's photograph of Kastellorizo's great fire of 6 July 1944, the only known image of the conflagration that destroyed over one-third of the island town, left some confused. Even though the image has been in circulation since the first publication in 1947 of Benyon-Tinker's graphic account, his arresting image was still unknown to many.¹ What was this, some asked. Was it the German bombardment of Kastellorizo? Who had taken the photograph? One curious observer even enquired if this was the much sought-after piece of evidence to confirm Allied culpability for Kastellorizo's devastating fire, an allegation long made, but never quite proven.

Perhaps we should begin with Benyon-Tinker himself, the British serviceman whose name is forever linked to the tragic event by virtue of this one image. Who was he and why was he on Kastellorizo at this critical moment in the island's history? More to the point, why had he captured

the devastating scene on his camera – and published it in his memoir – if indeed the British aim was to set the island alight to conceal wartime looting, as has often been alleged?

William E. Benyon-Tinker was a British naval non-commissioned officer who was part of the so-called 'Levant Schooner Flotilla', a fleet of small craft put into service by the British Navy for raids against German and Italian positions across the Aegean. At its height, the Flotilla comprised 13 ships, mainly 1-2 masted small timber craft of a type traditionally used by Greeks for trading and fishing. When Kastellorizo became the first Greek island to be liberated by the Allies on the early morning of 10 September 1943, it was hardly surprising that the island's accommodating harbour would become home to the Flotilla.

With savage German bombardment commencing on 17 October, the British made the fateful decision to evacuate the 1,000 or so civilians still remaining on Kastellorizo.

¹ W.E. Benyon-Tinker, *Dust Upon the Sea*, London 1947.

Contrary to the views of some, the motivation was not to facilitate looting from civilian homes without detection, though, as we shall see, significant looting undoubtedly did take place in the months that followed. At this early stage, the rationale behind the hurried evacuation was a genuine fear that the Germans would try to re-take the island after their initial bombardment. This was not to be the case, but there can be little doubt that this is what motivated the rushed movement of the local population, first to the opposite shore, and then on to Gaza via Cyprus.

If there was an ulterior motive behind the evacuation it was more about making remote Kastellorizo a relatively safe staging ground for further Allied raids on Aegean islands, should the Germans be repulsed. In the event, the Germans declined the opportunity to take the island but instead continued their bombing spree in the months of November and December 1943. By this time, many houses, emptied of their inhabitants, were already severely damaged, with large parts of the island town now resembling a veritable army camp comprising multi-ethnic Allied troops camped in lodgings made available by the evacuation and the destruction.

Benyon-Tinker was one of those who visited Kastellorizo in the immediate aftermath of the first German bombardments. His prior visit, soon after the British takeover on 10 September, had elicited comparisons to the villages of the 'French Riviera'. This time the scene was altogether different:

Castelloriso [sic] itself had changed quite a lot since I had last been there – and this for the worse; very much so! The Luftwaffe had made a couple of quite heavy raids on the Port, which was, in the usual familiar sickening way, littered with wreckage. A Cant flying boat (Italian) that had recently been working on a shuttle service between Castelloriso and Alexandria was resting on the bottom of the harbour with only her tail sticking out of the water, and there were several small craft of the caique type also resting where they should not be. Odd boxes and bits of wreckage, the flotsam and jetsam of a well-bombed harbour, were floating about idly, and the houses, too, bore eloquent testimony to the efficacy of high-explosive bombs...²

Despite being well-acquainted with wartime devastation, Benyon-Tinker was moved by what he saw:

Castelloriso, for some reason, has always depressed me... Now, with [the inhabitants] evacuated, and their houses, tumbled down and shattered from blast and fire, seeming empty and forsaken in the bright sunshine, the whole place reeked of decay and misery.³

With hostilities moving northwards in the Aegean, and the bombing at an end, Kastellorizo now became a supply base and safe haven for Allied operations. Surviving images show Allied servicemen in carefree poses, often playing to the camera, while their reminiscences are imbued with a fondness for this deserted island paradise that provided them with gentle and secluded respite from the rigours of war. After all, Kastellorizo's hospitable environment could offer other tangible benefits. As revealed in *Filia* through extracts from the candid diary of David Moore, a young Australian officer in the British Navy, the opportunity for looting in such an isolated setting was, for some, too hard to resist.⁴

As the months of 1944 slowly rolled on, and the war turned progressively in the Allies' favour, southern Europe began to experience what would prove to be one of its hottest summers on record. On Kastellorizo, temperatures in June and early July 1944 soared to 40 degrees on multiple consecutive days. And this is where we rejoin Benyon-Tinker who, on 6 July 1944, was approaching Kastellorizo with his flotilla of caiques while bound for Symi where they were to undertake a joint Allied naval assault. His motorised caique encountered a strong headwind as it turned sharply into Kastellorizo's harbour, and it was immediately apparent that something



A shelled Italian Cant flying boat lying in the ravaged harbour after the German bombardments of October 1943. (Parade, November 1943)

² Benyon-Tinker, p. 122.

³ Benyon-Tinker, p. 123.

⁴ *Filia*, no. 33 (2017).

⁵ Benyon-Tinker, p. 180.



Members of the Ierós Lóhos (Greek Sacred Band) in the square outside the church of Ayios Yeorgios tou Pigadhiou, May 1944. (the late Con Camillos)

wasn't right. Thick smoke was billowing from the middle of the town towards the point of the Kavos promontory, while orange flames could be seen devouring dwellings at a rapid pace.

Benyon-Tinker picks up the story from here:

The fire, which had started in the usual mysterious fashion, had by then reached one of the houses where ammunition is kept. This was going off quite nicely, and the general atmosphere was redolent of a good pre-war Guy Fawkes night! Most of the houses along the waterfront were blazing merrily, and the place was covered by a dense pall of black smoke – heavy and motionless in the still air.⁵



A view of the extent of the devastation before the damaged homes were cleared, 1945. The burnt houses stand in stark contrast to the undamaged dwellings with their roofs intact. (Hrousaki collection).

Benyon-Tinker's laconic, almost light-hearted, tone was to be the cause of some comment after the war; so much so, that it was even alleged that it was further proof of

British culpability for failing to protect the abandoned town. But it was no such thing; as the caption to his photograph indicates ('Kastellorizo burning away merrily'), it was very much in Benyon-Tinker's style to describe wartime events in a typically British 'stiff upper lip' style.

But what *did* really happen on that fateful day in July 1944? In 1984, *The Times*, prompted by a piece that had quoted locals alleging British complicity in the fire, ran a series of articles about wartime events on Kastellorizo. The articles elicited some swift replies from British servicemen who were firm in their rebuttals of any involvement in the outbreak of the fire. By contrast, the responses were more equivocal as regards the looting, with some ruling it out entirely, and others conceding that it was a reality of war and could not be denied.⁶

One British serviceman whose account admitted Allied looting was G.S. Kirk who was present on the island in February 1944, five months before the fire. He recalled seeing 'rusty sewing machines in the laneways waiting to be carried away', while the sight of 'twenty or so valuable Iznik plates and shallow bowls stacked on a motor launch on the orders of a senior naval officer' left him uncomfortable. In Kirk's view, there was no doubt about looting having taken place, just as there was no doubt about British responsibility for failing to secure the town. And the culprits were not just British; there is some evidence that looting was also carried out by some Greek troops and other servicemen in the Allied cause.⁷ Thankfully, the contemporaneous diary notes of David Moore put the issue firmly to rest, and we may safely conclude that Allied troops - British, Greek, Maltese & Indian (and even one Australian – David Moore himself) - engaged in wartime looting of abandoned homes on Kastellorizo.⁸

But what of the fire? What other primary sources exist that may shed light on the matter? As it happens, a previously overlooked declassified file held by the Public Records Office in Kew, London, gives us a new perspective on the disaster. In April 1952, the *Union of Intellectual Women of the Dodecanese*, a group of professional women in Athens with origins in the Dodecanese advocating for the rights of the island group in the aftermath of WWII, published a pamphlet entitled '*Listen to Greece*' by which they sought to shine a light on the tragedy of Kastellorizo. In impassioned terms, the pamphlet spoke of calamity upon calamity that had

⁶ See *The Times*, 17.7.84, 21.7.84, 28.7.84, 30.7.84, 31.7.84 and 11.8.84.

⁷ *The Times*, 11.8.84..

⁸ *Filia*, no. 33 (2017).

⁹ Public Records Office, Kew, UK, FO 371/101813 (PRO): Union of Intellectual Women of the Dodecanese, pamphlet no. 32 (April 1952), '*Listen to Greece*', pp. 1-4. The number of homes destroyed by the fire was closer to 800.



Kavos destroyed, 1945. (author's collection)

befallen the remote island culminating in the great fire in which 'three thousand houses' were destroyed after they had been looted so as 'to conceal the pillages committed.' In an ironic twist, the pamphlet included a copy of Benyon-Tinker's photograph (which had been published five years earlier) and called for the punishment of those responsible and compensation for those who had suffered loss.⁹

It didn't take long for the publication to catch the eye of the British Foreign Office. In June 1952, Jasper Blunt, a retired brigadier who had served as military attaché in Greece, sent a copy of the pamphlet to the Foreign Office enquiring whether the contents were true. This prompted a formal request of Britain's ambassador in Athens, John Galsworthy, to undertake an inquiry into the allegations. The investigation was swift and, while the finding stopped short of attributing blame for the fire on British troops, it did conclude that they had engaged in looting, something which Her Majesty's Government had hitherto denied and long considered abhorrent.¹⁰

According to the file, the primary testimony relied upon was that of General Christodoulos Gigantes, who had commanded the Hellenic *Ierós Lóhos* (Sacred Band) and served as liaison officer with British forces in the Dodecanese. He had arrived on Kastellorizo three days after the fire and was therefore seen as a credible source. Gigantes reported that the Allied force that remained on the island after the civilian evacuation was comprised of British, Maltese, Indian, Greek and Greek Cypriot troops. The Greek general added that it was widely accepted at the time that the extent of the fire was

a product of a combination of factors that included a lack of water, intense summer heat, a strong wind and inadequate personnel to fight the blaze. As to the fire's cause, Gigantes stated that it was 'generally believed' that the fire had started in a store that housed supplies for the British troops. This store belonged to 'NAAFI', the Navy Army Air Force Institutes, a co-ordinated network of stores for supplies sent to front for the benefit of British forces.¹¹

At some point during the inquiry, Gigantes appears to have asked to speak 'off the record'. The file makes evident why he did so; the Greek general confidentially reported that the prevailing view on the island immediately after the fire had been that NAAFI staff had started the fire 'in order to destroy their records and so cover up the illegal transactions in which they had been allegedly engaged.' This was a startling claim, and it is hardly surprising that when the Foreign Office came to report its finding, Gigantes' recollections were described as 'not really conclusive', and it was considered undesirable 'to wash very old linen in public after so long a time.' The general's confidential claims relating to the culpability of NAAFI staff were never to be tested.¹²

The minor furore over the pamphlet was to have at least one good outcome. On 7 March 1955, in answer to the claims of looting brought to light by the inquiry, an agreement was signed between the Greek and British governments which provided for compensation for wartime looting in the total sum of 10 million drachmae. A total of 850 Kastellorizian claims for wartime looting and other damage were submitted when applications were called for, though by the time the claims were assessed and payments made, the monetary sums awarded had lost significant value. Any sense of vindication was to be outweighed by a declining currency and the more immediate realities facing an island community utterly demoralised by war and relocation.

Another thirty years were to pass before the matter took a fresh turn by the publication of *The Times* articles. The passage of time made some eyewitnesses a little more forthright on the issue of responsibility. General Yeorgios Vorrias, later the chief military advisor to the Greek President and who was also a member of the *Ierós Lóhos*, recalled events a little differently to General Gigantes:

10 PRO, Letter J.E. Galsworthy (Ambassador) to FO, 6 August 1952.

11 PRO, Letter Galsworthy to FO, 6 August 1952,

12 PRO, Letter FO to Charles Mott-Radclyffe, 25 August 1952.

13 *The Times*, 31.7.84.

14 *The Times*, 31.7.84.

*We saw a small band of Greeks carrying copper kitchen utensils plundered from some house to sell in Turkey... They ignored our reprimands and headed for their caique. Shortly afterwards, we saw a fire break out in the direction from which they had come. The men we saw were civilian seamen on armed caiques who were being used for intelligence operations in the Dodecanese.*¹³

According to Vorrias, strenuous efforts were made to contain the fire and any claims of British or Allied responsibility for the fire's outbreak were undeserved:

*We blew up some houses with explosives in the hope of creating a belt to stop the fire reaching the British Navy's fuel dump at the far end of the harbour. But we underestimated how much wood was in those stone houses, and the fire got worse. When the fuel dump exploded, there was a fireball that rose to about 200 metres in the sky. It would really be a sin to say that the British troops looted and started the fire.*¹⁴

Our story therefore ends with a sense of continuing mystery. The overlooked revelations contained within the declassified file undoubtedly point to a line of inquiry that should have been pursued. Equally, the eyewitness reminiscences of General Vorrias add a layer of complexity that makes it hard to draw any firm conclusions. At present, all we can agree upon is that the fire does indeed appear to have been deliberately lit, possibly by British NAAFI staff or by some reckless Greek servicemen. This makes the tragedy an even greater one. Of course, while we may never know who started the blaze that destroyed two-thirds of the town of Kastellorizo that fateful day, we can be certain that its effects endure and lie at the heart of some of the continuing challenges the island community currently faces.

Filia edition 60 | Correction and identification

This photograph of a girls' mandolin class dates from 1932, and not 1929 as previously stated.

With the assistance of Allan Cresswell, Nicholas Pappas has identified the girls in the photograph. From left, they are:



Front Row: **Thiressia Symeon** (later Ethel Xanthis), **Anastasia** [unknown surname], **Zoe Tzambazi**, **Evangelia Pitsoni** (later Kakulas), **Evangelia Zombou**

Middle Row: **Evdokia Antona**, **Evdokia Tsakalou** (later Savvas), **Irini Kalaitzoglou** (Peretsi), **Irini Kalaitzoglou** (cousins), **Dialekti Pengli**, **Persephone Papadaki** (teacher)

Back Row: **Vaia Simonidou**, **Maria Pantazi**, **Katina Koufou** (later Mougali), **Chrisafina Alayioti**, **Maria Veniti** (later Zorbas)



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