



*The dramatic moment of the capture of Nikos Savvas and his British companions by the Italians from the movie adaptation of Operation 'Anglo' entitled 'They Who Dare' filmed in 1953 (author's collection).*

## Nikolaos Spyrou Savvas 1914-1942 He Who Dared

By Nicholas Pappas, Sydney

In the square of Kavos, now commonly known as 'Faros' (after the small lighthouse that sits atop the stump of the former Italian governate), stands a bust of war hero **Nikolaos ('Nikos') Savvas**. Frequently extolled, but hardly known, Nikos Savvas' wartime deeds are worthy of recounting as we approach the annual commemoration of the liberation of Kastellorizo by the Allies on 10 September 1943 - and the triumphant arrival of the Greek cruiser *Kountouriotis* three days later. For while Savvas had already paid the ultimate price one year prior to his island's liberation, his sacrifice in the name of liberty from fascist occupation deserves broader recognition.

### Early years on Kastellorizo

Surprisingly, Savvas was an unlikely candidate to take up the mantle against the enemy. Born on 6 June 1914, he was the second son of Kastellorizo's chief customs officer Spyros Vasiliou Savvas and Doukissa Nikolaou Stefanou. His father, by virtue of his position, was close to the Italian administrators on Kastellorizo, and the occasional prosecution of local merchants for undeclared imports

had sometimes made his father unpopular with what remained of the island's merchant elite. But unlike his elder brother Vassilis (born 3 September 1910), Savvas was short of work on Kastellorizo - and restless - so by 1935 we find him settled on Rhodes and working as a conductor on the buses operated by the Italian regime.

Savvas' exemplary conduct is attested to by surviving Italian police records which describe him as law-abiding and respectful of the regime. A minor gambling conviction in 1939 did not prevent him from applying to open a fruit and vegetable store, but his plans were scuttled by worsening economic conditions and the resulting withdrawal of credit by the banks. By mid-1940, Savvas was unemployed and penniless, dependent on remittances from his father on Kastellorizo and any odd jobs he could find. In July that year, he even signed up for the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, the leisure and recreational organisation founded by Mussolini in 1925. For the unemployed, any opportunity for gainful employment was acceptable in the face of wartime deprivations.

## Escape to Turkey

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that by 1941 Savvas was in discussions with other like-minded Greeks to abscond from Rhodes and seek opportunities in Turkey (which had declared its neutrality). In this, he found willing participants in fellow Kastellorizian **Loukas Konstandinou Tsabatsis** and Rhodian **Yeorgios Elia Kyrmihalis**. After agreeing to undertake a dash across the stretch of water to Anatolia from a quiet beach known as Ixia (near where the Hotel Miramare now stands), the three young men rowed off into the darkness during the early morning of 14 November 1941. Nikos was 27 years old, while Loukas was 28 and Yeorgios a mere 18 years old. For Nikos in particular, it was to be a fateful decision.

Departing the Italian-held islands of the Dodecanese (*'Isole Egeo'*) without permission was a serious offence in wartime. Within days, the absence of the three came to the attention of the Italian authorities and, in a characteristically swift manner, all three were convicted in *absentia* on 5 December 1941 of the serious charge of 'unauthorised expatriation' and the more minor charge of theft of the small rowboat they had used for the escape. But they had made it, and sheer relief overcame any apprehension as they rowed in an eastern direction past the distant lights of Kastellorizo two days later.



*In a previously unpublished image, Nikos Savvas is pictured in Rhodes in July 1940, the year before he set off from Rhodes with his two companions (General State Archives, Rhodes).*



*Another previously unpublished image of Savvas taken to accompany his application in 1940 for permission to operate a fruit and vegetable store (General State Archives, Rhodes).*

Limited food and water supplies meant that the young men had to make landfall without delay and they agreed Antalya was the ideal place. While the Turkish authorities permitted them to disembark and provided them with fresh rations, the group was disappointed to find the Turkish authorities more intent on pushing them eastwards, away from prying Italian eyes. A car was provided to take them to the nearby town of Serik and, from there, they continued on foot to Alanya, some 139 kilometres away. Help was again provided by sympathetic locals, but the clear message was that the Turkish authorities did not want a major diplomatic incident that might provoke Italy, and the three were again forced to continue eastwards. Their next stops were to be Anamour, Seleucia, Mersina and Adana, close to the Syrian border. By early February (1942), after walking over 400 kilometres, they found themselves in Halepi in northern Syria where they were intercepted by British officers who escorted them to Haifa. Their arrival there was precisely three months from when they had left Rhodes.

## Recruitment by the British & Operation 'Anglo'

The British were quick to realise that these enterprising young Greeks could provide critical information about Italian and German aerial forces based in Rhodes, so within

days they were transferred to Cairo for debriefing. Eager to assist their new-found allies, the three men agreed to join with the Special Boat Section led by **Captain Richard Allott** and 22-year-old **Lt. David Sutherland** in a highly dangerous undercover mission to destroy Italian and German aircraft based on Rhodes. A week later, Savvas and Kyrmihalis were back in Haifa for training in explosives, leaving Tsabatsis behind in Cairo from where he was to launch his own distinguished military career with service in Rimini, Italy, and, later, in Greece.

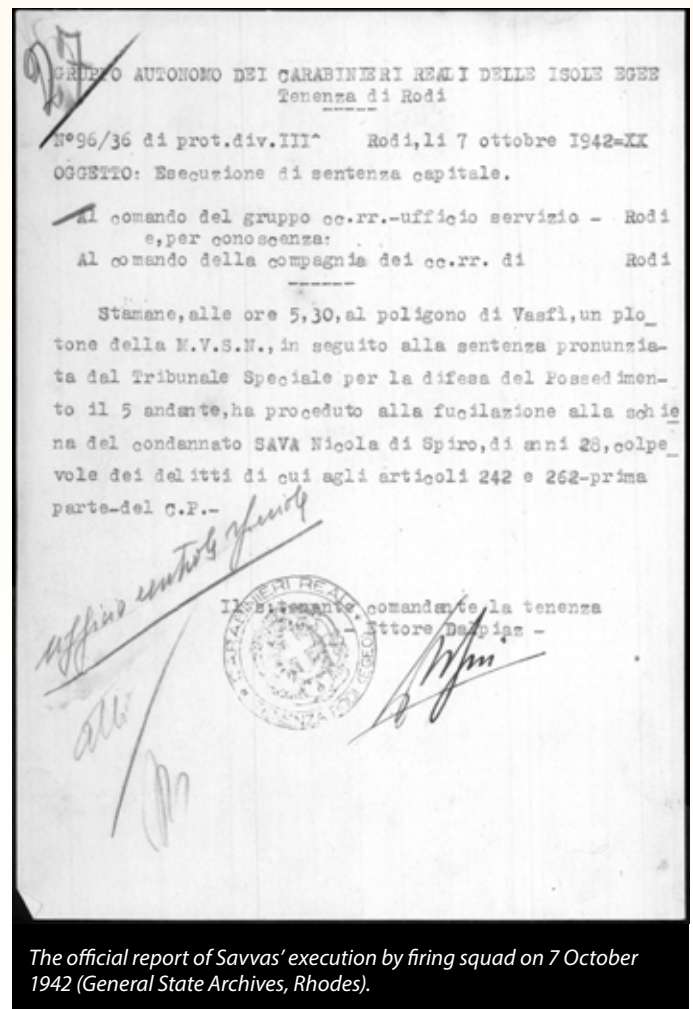
The targets for the operation – codenamed 'Anglo' - were the two airfields of Rhodes – Maritzá in the north-west, and Kálathos on the island's eastern coast. Aided by two Greek interpreters, captain **Yeorgios Tsoucas** and sublieutenant **Yeorgios Kalamvokides**, elaborate plans were made in great secrecy for a combined raiding force of twelve men, including Savvas and Kyrmihalis - who were to serve as guides - to sail to Rhodes aboard the Greek submarine *Papanikolis*. Once disembarked, the raiding party would make their way under cover of darkness to the two airfields where they would affix high-grade explosives with time-delay mechanisms to the aircraft. It was as bold a mission as one could imagine.

After final briefings, the raiding party departed Beirut on the afternoon of 31 August 1942. One can only imagine the apprehension of Savvas and Kyrmihalis as the submarines made their way slowly and quietly back towards the island they had left behind ten months earlier. Four days later, during the late evening of 4/5 September, within sight of Rhodes, the twelve men were transferred to a folding boat and inflatable rafts and, following the directions of the two young Greeks, rowed slowly to the agreed landing point, between Archangelos and Charaki. Over the next two days, they trekked in heavy summer heat under cover of night towards the village of Malona. There they remained hidden as they replenished their water supplies from nearby springs and readied themselves for the assault.

At last, on the evening of 7 September, Allott gave the order for the twelve to split into two groups. Kyrmihalis was assigned the task of guiding the party (including Allott) along the arduous 24 km journey across the island to Maritzá, while Savvas was given the task of leading the second party, which included Sutherland, to the airfield at Kálathos, some 13 km away. Both parties' progress was intentionally slow and cautious, as any sighting by the enemy could bring the entire operation to a premature and tragic end. The plan was that they would reunite on the night of 17/18 September at a nominated beach, their respective missions hopefully complete without loss of life.

### Success at a cost

In the result, both parties achieved success, but at considerable cost. Penetrating the Maritzá airfield after a demanding trek across the island, Allott and his men were able to plant their explosives and destroy at least 18 aircraft, among them valued *Savoia Marchetti* 79 bombers and *Macchi* C202 fighters. Unfortunately, all (including Kyrmihalis) were subsequently captured and placed in an Italian prisoner of war camp in Apollona where they remained until the Allied liberation of Rhodes.



The official report of Savvas' execution by firing squad on 7 October 1942 (General State Archives, Rhodes).

The Kálathos operation was also a complete success in terms of its aims, with 13 aircraft destroyed, but also at great cost, particularly for the unfortunate Savvas. Splitting into two smaller groups, the men were spotted by Italian sentries after affixing their explosives and, in attempting to scramble to safety, became separated. Only Sutherland and a marine made it back to safety, with Savvas and the other three members of the party also apprehended and transferred to Apollona where they, too, were detained as prisoners of war.

As Italian subjects, Savvas and Kyrmihalis were subject to the full force of Italian law, and both were placed on trial on 5 October before a hastily convened military tribunal. The outcome was hardly ever in doubt, and on the following day the tribunal delivered guilty verdicts against the two Greeks on the capital charge of bearing arms against the state. Savvas was condemned to death by firing squad, while his younger friend, Kyrmihalis, was sentenced to life imprisonment.

At 5.30am on 7 October 1942, some 11 months after first setting off from Rhodes with his two companions, Savvas was executed at the *Poligono di Vasfi* firing range at Kallithea by a platoon of Italian infantrymen. As was customary for those convicted of crimes against the state, Savvas was required to be seated with his back to the firing squad. He was 28 years old.



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*An original theatre card for the 1953 film adaptation of Operation 'Anglo', 'They Who Dare', which starred Dirk Bogarde (author's collection).*

## Aftermath

As the only member of the intrepid party who was not to survive the war, Nikos Savvas is deserving of his status as one of Greece's illustrious war heroes. In his 1998 memoir, David Sutherland recalls him with warmth and sadness, describing the mission as 'one of the most hair-raising experiences imaginable'.<sup>1</sup> And in the 1953 British film adaptation of the operation, *They Who Dare*, Savvas, renamed Patroklés and played by Alec Mango, is characterised as a softly spoken, yet determined, young man who risked all in the name of liberty for his homeland.

We, too, would do well to remember him.

1: Interestingly, Sutherland did not learn of the fate of Savvas until some 40 years later, when he was contacted by Rhodian lawyer and writer, **Yeorgios Vrouhos**, and the operation received deserved acclaim in Greece. In 1986, Sutherland made an emotional journey back to Rhodes, where, thanks to the efforts of Vrouhos, he visited the sites of his and his comrades' valour and met with the family of Kyrmihalis who, he learned with sadness, had died of tuberculosis in 1949 aged just 26.



*Nikos Savvas and Yeorgios Kyrmihalis reunited in a memorial in the modern town of Rhodes.*

# Megisti Hilltop

By Linda Kotis

I trekked up those steep stone steps, to visit Saint George of the Mountain, a one-room church and monastery, built on a basilica's ruins. Those four hundred fifty stone steps, carved switchback into the hillside, above the road circling Megisti, the isle where my grandfather was born. Grateful that strenuous exercise was still mine at age sixty-five, three days in a row, I did it. First day by myself, next with the Sydney-born Greek, and last with my new Turkish friends. The stone steps trailed behind me, red-tile roofs rested below. The harbor with water transparent, arriving ferries from Turkey, the Greek Navy ship departing, diners at seaside tavernas, island families with children at play, I saw it all, nine hundred feet straight down.

The hilltop lay sprawling ahead.

Each time I surveyed the hilltop, with its scrap of hand-built walls, I felt a push-pull between the now and the days no more. I thought of so many others, on this hilltop for thousands of years. Carving cisterns out of the rock, building stone fences and huts, herding their sheep and goats, growing olives and grapevines, worshipping pagan sites, converting to Orthodox churches, fleeing invaders and pirates—living and dying here. I trekked up those steep stone steps, three days in a row I did it, those four hundred fifty stone steps, leading to the hilltop above. I trekked up those steep stone steps, on the hills of my grandfather's birthplace. I trekked up those steep stone steps, then returned to my life down below.



## Linda Kotis Biography

"Megisti Hilltop" was first published in Mediterranean Poetry, an online international literary journal featuring writings of poets and authors whose lives and travels capture the very essence of the Mediterranean World. <https://www.odyssey.pm/contributors/linda-kotis/>

Linda Kotis is a writer and attorney based in Washington, DC. She is working on a memoir of her April 2024 trip to Greece, her ancestral homeland. Mediterranean Poetry published her prose poem, "Megisti Hilltop," about the trip. Another poem is forthcoming in The Owl's Rant. Linda's short texts and poems appear most every day of the week on SeniorWriteus, her Facebook page, at <https://tinyurl.com/5x2vr8pw>

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