PREFACE

My aim in writing this book is to bring the Greek and Crete campaigns to the public's attention. I want to ensure that the Greek campaigns are no longer ignored but recognised as an important part of Australia's involvement in the Second World War. It is time for the sacrifice and kindness of the Australian soldiers and Greek people to be acknowledged and understood. It saddens me to discover that veterans of these campaigns felt they needed to provide important reasons why these campaigns should be remembered. Others, of course, have not talked about the campaigns, having been traumatised enough by the battle and incarceration in German prison camps.

Unfortunately, the Australian campaign on the Greek mainland remains neglected on both sides of the globe. Instead, 28 October 1940, when the Greeks said '*oxi*' (or 'no') to the Italian invasion of their country, figures highly in their nation's commemorations. This is understandable given the courageous defence of their country against the Italians on the Albanian front, although the Greek government did award a medal to the Australian soldiers. The Australian government failed to grant veterans of the campaign official recognition for their involvement. Surely a Greek campaign medal is now long overdue.

The battle of Crete, on the other hand, merits official commemoration in Australia, and on the island of Crete commemorations abound. Around 20 May each year, the date of the German invasion, the Greek government sponsors a trip to Australia of three high-ranking officers; the Australia government hosts their two-week commemoration visit. It is, however, a relatively low-key affair with few people outside the Cretan Brotherhood of Australia and the few surviving members of the 6th Australian Division being aware of it. There is little publicity about this event in the wider community.

Each year, as wreaths are laid at the war memorial at Sydney's Martin Place, people walking past remain unaware of what is being commemorated. There are no banners identifying the commemoration, and little is said in the media about the Greek campaigns. Some attribute this disregard to the public's preoccupation with Gallipoli and Kokoda. There is no doubt that what is said in the press and taught at schools, as part of the history curriculum, has greatly influenced and indeed fuelled the public's interest in Kokoda, which has now taken its place alongside Gallipoli as one of the nation's foundation myths. Nothing has been written about the impact of being overlooked on the veterans of the Greek campaigns, although the effect on Vietnam veterans of being denied, for many years, public recognition for their involvement in an unpopular war has been well documented. Many veterans of the Greek campaigns became prisoners of the Germans and feel that their sacrifice has not been understood or acknowledged.

In general, historians have failed to capture the horror of the soldiers' military service in Greece. Retrospectively the battle has been sanitised and its importance downgraded strategically, militarily and politically; often being presented as a diversion while the real war was being fought elsewhere, in North Africa. The conditions that the Australian forces endured were not sufficiently described in Australia's official history of the Greek and Crete campaigns or in American and British books subsequently written about the subject.

Military historians' preoccupation with operational history has meant that other aspects of campaigns have been disregarded, primarily because, for a long time, the field has been dominated by men, who tended to write about campaign strategy and tactics. Yet the outcome of the Greek campaigns cannot be understood by focusing exclusively on the military operations. Such important issues as how Australian troops interacted with their allies on the ground, and why establishing good relations with them mitigated the worst effects of war, have gone unnoticed.

Given this state of affairs it is not surprising that relations with the people of Greece have been dismissed as irrelevant in studies of the campaign, yet they help to explain what really happened in Greece and why. It is also the height of arrogance and condescension to write

a history of the Greek campaigns without reference to the Greek people, but this is what has happened to date. During the later part of the war the British and American military establishment considered Allied relations important enough to provide guides on the subject for their soldiers. They produced booklets instructing soldiers on how to negotiate everyday life in Germany, Britain and Australia, although no such book was produced for Greece.[1] These publications offered advice on a diverse range of topics such as national character, language, food, recreation, women and even details about less savoury aspects of the society such as tuberculosis, venereal disease and malnutrition. Their aim was to ensure that troop behaviour did not alienate local populations.

As a child the Second World War was brought vividly to mind by my mother's singing of the war songs of Sophia Vembo, the Vera Lynn of Greece.[2] My mother's own survival during the war rested on the brave action of her stepbrother, George Karayianopoulos, ten years her senior, who stole a tin of olive oil from a train destined for Germany so that his family would not die of starvation, as many Greeks did at this time, knowing he would be shot if caught. My maternal grandmother Fotini Moschidou, a war refugee herself from Asia Minor, witnessed the beheading of her husband at the hands of Turkish soldiers in Smyrna in 1922. She relayed the story of the family who lived across the road from our home in Athens who were forced to sell their house at the height of the German occupation for a loaf of bread as a result of the devastating famine that had gripped Greece in 1941–42.

My own connection with Australia began when I arrived in Sydney at an early age with my mother Emilia, to be reunited with my father Theodore Costadopoulos, an industrial chemist who had emigrated to Australia a few years earlier. My interest in Australia's role in Greece was encouraged by my marriage to Stuart, whose father, Douglas Colin Hill, fought in the Second World War. Sergeant Doug Hill was in the 7th Division of the Second Australian Imperial Force. He was not deployed in Greece but fought in Syria and later in New Guinea. Like many Australia soldiers of his time, he had no time for the Egyptians. What he thought of the Greeks I do not know as he

died prematurely at the age of forty-eight. Possibly his war experience had exacted a toll on his health. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a connection exists between war service and early morbidity among World War II veterans. My mother-in-law, Nancy Maude Hill, who joined the Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force and drove trucks and serviced planes at air force bases, often discussed her wartime experiences with me.

I also taught Australian history for many years, noticing how little had been written about the Greek and Crete campaigns in high school textbooks. The neglect of these campaigns fuelled my interest in the subject. What concerned me was that veterans had not been awarded a medal by the Australian government for their service on the Greek mainland and later on Crete. What made it doubly insulting for the veterans was that they were refused permission by the Australian government to wear the medal awarded to them by the Greek government at Anzac Day commemorations. It was not until 1994, through the tireless lobbying of members of the 6th Australian Division, such as Lieutenant Terry Fairbairn of 2/1st Infantry Battalion, that this decision was reversed.

Clearly, there is still a lot that needs to be said about the Greek and Crete campaigns. In this book I have attempted to capture the feelings, emotions and friendships that emerged between the Australian soldiers and the Greek people during these turbulent years. Many times I found myself simultaneously laughing and crying at comments made about Greece and its people by Australian soldiers in their diaries or letters sent home. I was also very moved by the extraordinary kindness displayed by the Greeks towards their Australian allies. Although some may argue that it is important to keep emotion out of history for the purpose of objectivity, I feel that readers cannot truly understand what these soldiers and civilians endured without experiencing some of these emotions for themselves. So I hope that my book takes you on an emotional journey not dissimilar to the one undertaken by those involved in these campaigns. It is a trip worth taking, as I found out from my six-year study of the Greek campaigns.