

BATTLE OF CRETE

Statement

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [9.10 pm]: I rise to talk about a couple of things I have attended in the last few days in remembrance of the eightieth anniversary of the Battle of Crete. Last Thursday evening after the house adjourned, I attended the unveiling of the plans for a memorial to be placed in Kings Park in honour of the Battle of Crete, given the service of Western Australians in that battle. A committee has come together and come up with a final design for that memorial. It is interesting to note that even though the Western Australian contingent that fought in the Battle of Crete was pretty significant, there is no specific war memorial in Western Australia acknowledging the sacrifices that were made by Australians and those from Greece and the cause of freedom in that battle. I congratulate the committee on reaching the point at which it has now selected a design, and it is looking forward to trying to get that memorial built.

On Sunday just gone, I attended the State War Memorial in Kings Park for the memorial service for the Battle of Crete. The sole Western Australian surviving veteran of the Battle of Crete, Arthur Leggett, who is 102, came along to both of those events on Thursday evening and Sunday. I have to say that he strutted in to the event on Thursday evening, and you would never have picked this was a 102-year-old veteran who had been imprisoned for four years in a German prisoner of war camp. It was incredible to see how fit and healthy he was and to see him at the service. I acknowledge a number of people there at the war memorial service on Sunday, including my colleague in this place Hon Dan Caddy as well as members from the other place. It was great to see everyone there.

I will talk a little bit about the Battle of Crete. This was a battle for the island of Crete, which was fought in the second week of May 1941 when the British commonwealth and Greek garrisons on the island were attacked by German airborne troops. It was one of the biggest aerial assaults in history to that point. Even though those defenders based on the island had greater numbers, they were overwhelmed by the incredible advantage that the Germans had in their logistical and air support. Many thousands of paratroopers came down. They were very well organised and they overwhelmed the troops on the island. I am going to go through a description of some parts of the battle from a document from the Australian War Memorial. It states —

The invasion of Crete began the morning of May 20. Ralph Honner, at the time a company commander with the 2/11th Battalion, —

That is a Western Australian battalion —

described the arrival of the Germans, as seen from his vantage point under the olive trees east of Retimo:

[It was] a spectacle that might have belonged to a war between the planets. Out of the unswerving flying fleet came tumbling lines of little dolls, sprouting silken mushrooms that stayed and steadied them, and lowered them in ordered ranks into our consuming fire. And still they came, till all the fantastic sky before us was filled with futuristic snowflakes floating beneath the low black thundercloud of the processional planes—occasionally flashing into fire as if struck by lightning from the earth.

These “little dolls”—German paratroopers of General Kurt Student’s XI Air Corps—were highly trained and motivated. For ten days they, and the elite mountain troops that were sent to reinforce them, hunted and were hunted by Australian, New Zealand, British, and Greek soldiers, as well as Cretan farmers, townspeople, and police. Fighting was savage and bloody, with little quarter given. Men fought to the death in solitary duels or major engagements; their bodies cluttered the narrow streets of the towns or lay among the olive trees and creek beds of the countryside.

As I said, the defending forces were overwhelmed eventually and many thousands of soldiers were evacuated by ship as soon as they could be. Some Western Australian veterans who fought in that battle hid on the island for more than a year, thanks to the help of the Cretan people. I think it is particularly important that we remember that great bond that has been forged between our nation and the Greek nation as a result of this and other battles we jointly fought. Of course, Greece was involved as far as one of the islands being used for the Gallipoli campaign.

I think it is very important that we remember the service of those people, particularly the Western Australians. I look forward to a memorial being established in Western Australia for this important battle. It was great to see so many people attend the service on the weekend, even though it poured with rain most of the time, as Hon Dan Caddy can attest to. We were both hiding under the same umbrella at one point. It was a very good service. I would like to acknowledge the committee for organising that and, of course, thank the Consul of Greece in Perth for the invitation to attend. It was particularly good to see members of the armed services there. It was acknowledged that they obviously had not been able to celebrate Anzac Day in the traditional way, so it was good for them to come out to the State War Memorial on Sunday and remember the eightieth anniversary of the Battle of Crete.

House adjourned at 9.17 pm
