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God's Soldier

DURING A GENERAL MOBILIZATION immediately following the invasion by Italian forces plunging into Greece through Albania, I was sent to Athens. I was taken ill with typhus, though, which kept me from going to the Albanian front. When I recovered, the last troops of our regiment had already been sent. The colonel, knowing of my experience in shipping and receiving, put me in charge of his personal supplies at his home in Patisia, Athens. This again prevented me from going to the Albanian front.

Mussolini's legions, which outnumbered the Greek lines of defense, soon bogged down. After their thunderous

defeat in March of 1941, Germany had to go to Italy's aid, while the British sent an army to help us. Hitler's eyes were now turned on Greece.

Easter of 1941 found me in the barracks of Goudi, Athens. When I learned that the Allies were losing the war and that Greece would soon be occupied, I prayed that God would enable me to return to my loved ones in Crete. The barracks were heavily



Panos during the German invasion of Crete in 1941

guarded, however, and no one was allowed to leave. After praying, I picked up my bag and walked over to a lieutenant standing guard by the main gate.

“What are you up to, corporal?” the lieutenant asked.

“I request that I report for duty in my home town, sir,” I said.

“Request denied,” he said sardonically.

Speechless, I handed him my undershirt along with my papers.

Face filled with disgust, the lieutenant flung my lice-infested undershirt to the ground.

“I haven’t taken a bath for weeks, sir!” I said.

“Then go take a bath!” he growled and hurriedly signed my papers.

THE TROOP carrier *Samos* lay deserted at the port of Piraeus. Hundreds of soldiers waited to get on board and sail to Crete. But the only crew member on *Samos*, I learned, was a frustrated engineer. The rest of the crew had abandoned the ship.

Teeming with travelers going overseas and only a short distance from *Samos* was the passenger ship *Ellas*. Many had boarded *Ellas* hoping to avoid the Germans.

I managed to get on *Samos*. The engineer was relieved to see someone with maritime experience and willing to help. He informed me that the other crew members were afraid the ship was in no condition to sail to Crete, as it had many mechanical problems, including a jammed capstan that would not release the anchor. Mainly, though, he said, that the other crew members were simply fearful of an air raid by German Stukas.

After we determined the course of our voyage, I lowered the gangplank and ordered the soldiers to come on board. There were hundreds of them. It was obvious I was only a corporal, but they all obeyed my orders without question. I directed them to the belly of the vessel and

ordered some armed guards to threaten to shoot at anyone trying to come out.

Within an hour *Samos* was filled beyond capacity—well over 1,500 men! I sensed an enormous responsibility and prayed for God's direction.

We were about to sail that afternoon when the German *Stukas* came. Their guns and bombs missed us, but they hit *Ellas*. I thought I was losing my mind! "My God, spare us!" I shouted.

Ellas was sinking. Our panicked soldiers tried to come out but the guards kept them from becoming inviting targets of themselves.

The air raid was over. None of us had been hit. Fearing a second attack or wishing to aid the air raid victims, many soldiers asked to be let out—an opportunity I seized to hand out every tract I carried as the men went down the gangplank.

An hour later the soldiers began to return, and so did the captain himself, another engineer, and another crew member. The captain inquired by whose authority I had assumed control of the ship and threatened to hit me with his fists. I purposely raised my voice and said that I had hundreds of witnesses that he was a deserter, and that he had better stick to the helm all the way to Crete or he'd be arrested and court-martialed. That was enough to arouse the indignation of some brave Cretans who at once seized the captain, brought him to the helm, and kept him under close surveillance.

Because it was safer to travel by night, at daybreak we stopped at the island of Kea—60 kilometers (37 miles) southeast of Athens. When I told the soldiers to seek food and protection on the island away from the ship, they obeyed as before. I had gained their trust.

On the island I met a policeman who had moved there from Crete, and who had often accused me of proselytizing and brainwashing people with my tracts. But this time he not only invited me to his home for dinner, he asked me to talk to his wife and two daughters about my faith in God.

On our way back to the ship that afternoon we saw German Stukas approaching. Immediately they dropped bombs over *Samos*, but our ship was not hit. The bombs seemed to follow an unpredictable path and hit the water. When the soldiers later asked me for a religious explanation of the phenomenon, I told them that as long as we were willing to call upon God for protection, he would provide not only for our safety, but also for our stomachs. Indeed, the bombs had killed enough fish to feed an army! Freshly caught fish in their hands, the hungry soldiers swarmed around a nearby bakery, where earlier in the day they had devoured every piece of bread they could buy.

Oh, the miraculous opportunities the loving Father used to reach those hundreds of souls with his Word as we sailed on! Crammed together in the belly of the ship in absolute darkness, one after another the soldiers asked questions about the Bible, requested prayer, made promises and vows, and received the message of Christ. Never once did any soldier make any sarcastic remarks about the words that were spoken or make light of religion.

At daybreak we stopped at the tiny island of Andimilos, about 85 kilometers south of Kea. There we saw the smoldering wreckage of a ship which, according to some fishermen in the area, had recently been torpedoed by German submarines. As we began to evacuate, we again heard the high-pitched shriek of German Stukas. Many terror-stricken soldiers jumped in the choppy waters.

The soldiers wanted an explanation again. Why hadn't the Germans dropped bombs this time? I told them that perhaps the Germans were out of bombs, but my explanations did not seem to satisfy them. "You are God's man," they said. "You should stay on the ship all the time." That was a well-deserved testing time for me, a reminder that I was an instrument of God and with a mission to direct the eyes of those men toward heaven, not to attribute God's intervention to chance.

Heavy clouds gathered over our heads by afternoon. It was windy and cold. The soldiers had returned on board, but our wave-lashed craft was in danger of running aground. I asked some to keep praying that God would release the anchor, while two volunteers and I lowered a boat in the hope of reaching a rock with a cable. Our intrepid efforts against the fierce waves proved fruitless, so we returned to the ship.

We found a fretful captain trying to release the anchor by using profanities. Then suddenly it felt as though we had been hit by a submarine. The ship tipped on its left. We fell upon each other, and our weight caused the ship to tip even more. The prow had come to rest atop a reef. We had run aground.

Panic spread among us, for without an anchor we would be smashed against the rocks. "Lord," I prayed silently, "is this how far you're taking us?"

In a moment there was another loud bang. The anchor had been released! "Courage, men! Courage!" I shouted. An officer of the music band praised my faith; but I, shaking my head, deplored my lack of faith. Hadn't God answered my prayer in the barracks? Had he not heard the soldiers' prayers? Had he not shown us enough signs that he would be with us all the way against all odds? Yet I had questioned him. How could my God allow me, of so little faith, to carry out a mission this size? "Father, forgive me," I prayed. "And help me not to fail you again."

The captain asked me what ideas I had now.

"Courage," I said. "God is helping us. Let's have the men move to the other side of the ship. You get up there and move the ship with the propeller back and forth and get us unstuck."

There was a gleam of hope in the captain's eyes. The unbelieving is comforting the despairing, I thought to myself.

The soldiers began to move to the right, and the ship suddenly tipped to the right. Pandemonium! The men thought the ship was going to capsize. Panic-stricken, they

instinctively rushed to the left side, causing the ship to tip to the left, then again to the right, and so on, the degree of incline increasing with each alternate move. Finally, somehow, the ship stopped rolling and its hull floated free.

The sun went down. Our craft set sail again in absolute darkness. Our bodies were bruised and aching, our hair stiff with salt, our eyes red from lack of sleep; but we knew we were halfway home.

Toward midnight we heard the roar of warplanes. They circled over our heads and sent us bright signals.

“The Germans!” some men shouted. “We’re lost!”

I raised my eyes in prayer and stood still. I sensed no fear.

“British! They’re British!” shouted the captain, who signaled back with a flashlight that we were fugitives. The planes were en route to the port of Souda in Crete. And, by God’s grace, so were we.

By afternoon the next day we reached the port of Souda. The port was a mine field. Losing heart, the captain asked me if I knew the way. To comfort the man, I said that I had sailed those waters not long ago and thought that I could still manage; but truly, it was I who needed God’s comfort and reassurance now, for I knew nothing about those mines. I believed that God leaves nothing half-done and therefore was going to help us till the end, but still my head was telling me that we could be blown into pieces any second. My hands on the helm and my agonizing heart in my throat, I hummed songs of praise and asked God to strengthen me and my faith.

An hour later our maritime adventure was over. *Samos* lay securely at anchor in our home port, and none of us had been lost.

Now I could see how God used my experience as a ship boy for a purpose and my relationship with him for a mission. In the midst of the hundreds of soldiers coming ashore, I unreservedly raised my hands and voice toward heaven and magnified the name of Almighty God!

LIVING daily under life-threatening conditions, I prayed for every step I took and every decision I made. Completely resigned to God's guidance and protecting hand, I learned to live each moment overshadowed not by my own fear, but by God's mercy. I saw each life-and-death situation as another trial and another testing, as well as the root of another manifestation of my growing relationship with my Master.

After a blessed reunion with my loved ones, I reported for military duty. Being among the first to report, I exercised the option to join the battalion under the command of Maj. Papadakis, a family friend. Strangely, the recruiting officer insisted that I be transferred to another unit, which disturbed me. My desire was that God would overrule that decision, but in the end I still had to confront the recruiting officer's authority.

Due to a lack of military personnel, I was promoted to sergeant major. My area of operation was near the bridge of Alikianou, where heavy air raids were anticipated. Already by May 14, 1941, the Germans had begun a systematic bombing of ports, cities, roads, and central areas of defense on the island. Violent bombardment of the airfield at Maleme, near Chania, began the morning of May 20. We were attacked by air on May 21, and learned that day that all of Maj. Papadakis' men had been killed including the major himself.

After the attack, I ran to the headquarters in Chania to report the casualties. As a reward for my perilous 11-kilometer run from Alikianou, I was given a 15-hour leave, during which I managed to get my family moved to the village of Perivolia.

When I reported for duty, I was issued a written authorization to recruit men from the surrounding villages to perform noncombatant service and to supply food to the fighting units.

Going toward the village of Fourne, I felt hot bullets hissing by my ears. As I ducked beneath a bridge, I thought of Psalm 91:7: "*A thousand may fall at your side, ten*

thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.” Realizing what was happening, I prayed that God would intervene. My hands acted as if ordered by a will other than my own and waved a white handkerchief in the air. In moments, I was surrounded by German soldiers.

THE prisoners exchanged not a word as the camion jounced its way toward the unknown. I looked at those



The bridge of Alikianou where Panos was captured by the Germans

despairing, exhausted faces and found it difficult to accept the idea that I, too, was a prisoner of war.

The camion made its final stop and we found ourselves in a concentration camp in Ayious Apostolous. At first I did not recognize the area—there was barbed wire all around, and German guards surrounding prisoners at work.

I knew very little about German concentration camps, but from what I had heard I suspected that hard labor, torture, starvation, uncertainty about tomorrow, and even instant execution lay in store. I thought of my wife and three children, whom I had not seen for several days. “Lord,” I prayed, “revive in me the flame of my conviction that you have a definite plan for me in this life. Lay your protective hand upon all my loved ones, and also upon me.”

Our first task that afternoon was to restore a huge tent that had blown down over the first-aid equipment. The captives were yelling confused instructions to each other, and after a period of frustration I yelled out, “Let just one,

not everyone, give orders around here!” The men froze, staring at me. The only stare that gave me a sensation of uneasiness, however, was coming from under a German colonel’s hat.

Working together, we at last drove the final peg into the ground. But I had no sooner caught my breath and gazed into the twilight to see the first stars when the German colonel and a guard came up and signaled me to follow. The colonel stopped at his headquarters and turned around to look at me as if he meant to say something friendly. Then he pointed to his guard, who stood a couple of meters to my right and holding a machine gun.

“You are to go with him tomorrow morning,” he said firmly in broken Greek. “I am giving you twenty-five prisoners. Your task will be to walk into every food store and every garden as far as Chania.”

Vandalism! I thought. Extortion! But I had no choice.

The condition in which I found Chania the next day was beyond description. Buildings had been bombed. People were burying their dead. The city was nearly deserted—everyone who could had sought refuge in nearby villages. Those who had stayed behind now witnessed savagery at the hands of their own friends, for they were people I knew. But none dared to object to what was happening; none dared to protest as he watched his food, the food of his family, being forced away. With heavy, aching hearts, we stuffed the truck with all the edible goods we could find, until there was barely enough space for us.

As we approached Splantzia, I felt cold chills all over my body. I began to shake. “Just in time!” I whispered with trembling lips, and a prayer of gratitude to God rose within me for his protecting hand. Had the Lord not provided that 15-hour leave for me to move my family to Perivolia, all my loved ones would most assuredly have been killed, for an incendiary bomb had exploded inside our house!

That evening we returned from our foraging with great quantities of meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables. Shouts of

relief rose from the hungry prisoners, most of whom had not eaten for days. But my own heart was breaking.

The venture gained favor for me in the eyes of the Germans and the captured men. The German colonel announced that night that I was in charge of the prisoners. Immediately I divided the men into groups to facilitate the rationing of food and the organization of labor.

When the British bombed our concentration camp two nights later, the men ran to my tent and found me on my knees praying and singing praises to God. Surprise replaced their panic, and in moments I was sharing with them my testimony and God's message of salvation.

But what I had been forced into doing during that food-gathering expedition did not match my Christian testimony. Knowing that I would soon be sent out again, I brought the matter before God for a solution. Of all solutions, the most satisfactory one was also the most impossible—escape. I knew this would be a matter of life and death, but there was no other way out of my predicament.

The next day I assigned another prisoner to take charge of the rations. When I explained my intentions to him and to some of the prisoners, they reacted with fear.

“But how are you going to escape, Panos? You know they'll mow you down!”

“Certainly not over the fence,” I said with a smile. “God has his way.”

That afternoon I looked half soldier, half civilian. Sack over the shoulder, hat on my head—a gift from a civilian who wished that I have protection from the hot sun—I began to whistle “Onward Christian Soldiers” and walked toward the well-guarded gate of the concentration camp. I saluted the guard, he saluted back, and I exited. So I would not be suspected as an escapee, I purposely passed near a company of German officers standing outside the gate and engaged in conversation. After saluting them, still whistling, I continued my escape without any further complications. Like Peter walking out of prison under the noses of the

guards, I walked under the noses of the German soldiers and was free.

Only when I found myself with my wife and children and the rest of the relatives in Perivolia did I realize, with incredulity, the apparent absurdity of my action. Logically speaking, it was absolutely impossible! Most assuredly, God had barred every suspicion from my captors' minds.

My six-day ordeal in captivity was over. God was my Captain, and I was his soldier—a soldier of the Cross.

GOD used my deliverance from the Germans to draw ears and eyes to his miracle-working power. While bombs fell all around us in Perivolia and machine guns raged, the Spirit of God fell close upon me, prodding me to intercede for the souls of those I loved. In a house filled with loved ones, neighbors, and friends, I fell on my knees and asked God to have mercy on each one of us and to draw us by his Spirit, to cleanse our souls, and to protect us from harm and evil. One by one, they all fell on their knees and asked God to have mercy on them. What a moving sight it was to see those especially close and dear to me seeking God with all their hearts! The only person refusing to kneel and pray, however, was my father.

We studied the Bible and prayed every day. In less than a week virtually all the neighborhood joined us, including a policeman and once even Papayiannis, the priest of Perivolia who in the past two years had persecuted me for telling the villagers that forgiveness of sins was not possible after death. But the fear of imminent death was too real now to allow room for disagreements, let alone for solving any differences. Everyone listened to God's Word, everyone prayed. And God saved souls.

Dive-bomber Stukas kept flying above our heads at ear-breaking proximity, spreading terror. Homes nearby were blasted, the earth heaving under our feet with every blast and making our house tremble. But for each bomb aimed at our rooftop there were dozens of prayers lifting it away, for we continued to give ourselves to prayer.

On June 14, God performed a miracle in my father's life. As we were praying, my father humbled himself before God on his knees and asked him to forgive him of all his sins and save his soul. As tears of joy and peace coursed down his face and ours, we all hugged him and kissed him and thanked God together. It was a miracle we all had been hoping for, and God performed it through the importunity of prayers of faith.

ON the morning of June 20, 1941, looking out of the upstairs window, my boys Terpandros and Demetrios saw Germans kicking doors open and forcing men out of their houses at gunpoint.

"Baba, Baba! Wake up!" they shouted as they stamped their feet on the wooden floor, shaking me out of my sleep. "The Germans are coming with machine guns!"

God helped me sense the urgency of the moment. I grabbed my pants and shoes, dashed out of the house, and threw myself over the wall into the adjacent vineyard. I heard the Germans ordering men out of their hiding places, then a few shots. "Protect your people, my Lord!" I prayed, realizing it wasn't hard labor the Germans had in mind.

Two gunshots were fired next to my ears, and a pair of hot bullets ripped through the grape leaves near my hiding place. Slowly, I raised my head and saw a German officer's eyes and pistol staring straight at me. Holding my breath, I waited. The German officer looked to his right and walked away.

Grateful to God for his miracle, I collapsed among the grape vines, fully aware that he had caused the enemy's eyes not to see me.

I was grateful to God also that my father and Uncle Dukas had gone to work in the garden since early morning. When I heard the Germans kicking doors, shouting, and searching every corner, I knew they would find no man in the house, only women and children.

I remained hidden among the leaves for a long time. Meanwhile, from the window upstairs Chrysa could see Germans rounding up the dozens of captured men and herding them away. Was I among them? She didn't know.

Later I heard men shouting helplessly in the distance—I couldn't make out what. Then the rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire, followed by dead silence—then one more shot. “God, are you allowing our people to get killed?” I said, my heart breaking.

Moments later I heard a town official assuring the residents of Perivolia that it was all over. He urged them to come out of their houses immediately so they could bury their dead within one hour, or the Germans would penalize them. Mothers, wives, and young girls rushed out of their houses, screaming and weeping and wailing hysterically and heading for the gory scene of the execution of their own husbands, fathers, brothers and sons.

Totally broken, I could do nothing except cringe in agony and let my bleeding heart weep and pray. God had protected me from sure death again and again; but our village of Perivolia now lay decimated.

“Pano? Pano?” I heard Chrysa's trembling voice calling me. “Are you there?”

She had just returned from the place of execution, and having not counted me among the dead she was hoping to find me still alive.

“Over here!” I said and came out of my hiding place.

Her face was drained of color, her lips white, her eyes filled with horror. “Hide! The Germans! All they caught, they killed!” she said, stumbling over her words. “Everyone! Sabbas—and Pispisis—and—and your father!”

I began to shake like a leaf. I felt disoriented. I didn't know which way to go. Chrysa dragged me here and there until we reached the house. I poured a bucket of cold water over my head as if to try to wake up from a horrible nightmare I was having. Then I wept bitterly and talked to my heavenly Father.

I learned that the Germans had found three of their soldiers killed and buried in Perivolia by noncombatant men, presumably some villagers from Perivolia. By way of retribution, for each of their dead the Germans had to kill eleven men from Perivolia who were caught within an area they had cordoned off, one end of which happened to be our very house. My father, unaware of the danger, had left Uncle Dukas in the garden and headed home earlier than usual in order to surprise us with some fresh squash and other vegetables. That's when he fell into the hands of the Germans.

Of the men captured, those who had produced evidence of residence outside Perivolia had been released. My father, too, had been released for a while, after a German-speaking interpreter from Switzerland, wife of the assistant minister Rev. Paidakis, spoke to a German officer on my father's behalf. But after the men were lined up against the wall and counted, the German officer in charge of the firing squad discovered that he was short one man from Perivolia, so he ordered my father to stand against the wall again.

Finally my mother and Theodora returned from burying my father. I held my mother's bloodstained hands, kissed her pain-filled face, and pressed her bleeding heart close to mine. She told us that the bullet in her beloved's lower abdomen did not bring immediate death; a coup de grace to the head did. I remembered then the single shot I had heard at the end of the execution. My mother's agony now pulsed inside the void that shot had left in my heart.

Heaven now seemed closer as God comforted and strengthened us with his Word. We all knelt to thank him for the comforting assurance that he had so timely allowed my father to become a child of his.



Panos' father, Terpandros Zachariou

During the initial German blitzkrieg in Perivolia, and while Panos was still in the concentration camp, his family sought refuge in an L-shaped dugout in the village. They were still trying to reach the far end of the shelter when a barrage of German bullets entered the shelter. One bullet scraped Theodora's cheek, then ricocheted and hit her mother, Maryi, in both feet. Grandma Maryi's wounds turned gangrenous, and a few weeks later she died.



The monument in the village of Perivolia where Panos' father, days after asking God for forgiveness, was executed by the Germans on June 20, 1941 along with other innocent civilians.



Demetrios Jimmy Zachariou, left, and Everett Stenhouse examine the wall where Jimmy's grandfather was executed.