

# Survivor tells saga of courageous homeland

BY CHRIS KASSEL  
CORRESPONDENT

Since the death of her beloved husband 13 years ago, Despina Kartakis has lived alone. But in some ways, the 71-year old West Bloomfield resident has been living alone — within her memories — since May 21, 1941.

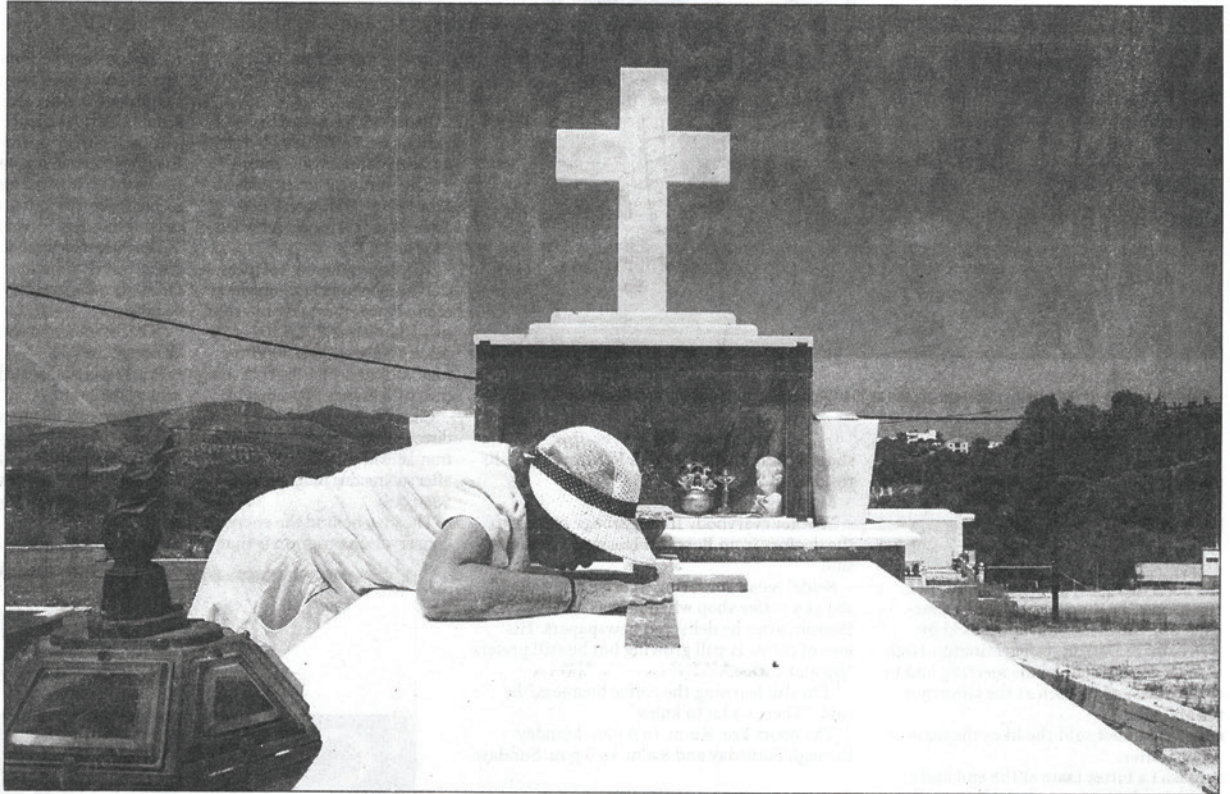
Until this year, she considered many of these memories too horrifying to share.

Born in Crete just prior to World War II, Kartakis was a preschooler in the small seaside village of Galatas when the Nazis invaded the island following their victory in mainland Greece. Throughout the attack, transport planes dropped 8,000 German paratroopers over Crete, and the resistance of the islanders, fighting back with bird rifles and farm implements, is legendary. Unfortunately, Nazi retaliation was swift and consummate, and the dive bombers that arrived to dispatch the Galatas snipers forced Kartakis, her younger brother Yanni and her father Manuel, to seek shelter in a natural cave behind the parish church of Panagia.

"That's when my young life was altered," Kartakis recounts, eyes misting, subconsciously touching her legion of scars. "That's when everything changed."

A bomb detonated within feet of the cave and Yanni, then 4, was killed instantly and Despina's father was badly wounded. The same blast of shrapnel tore through Kartakis' upper body and destroyed her jaw, leaving her only enough strength to crawl out through the bomb crater where she soon lost consciousness. Found by mop-up crews and believed dead, she was buried in a hastily dug grave — later, alerted by her pet dog, survivors discovered that she was still alive and brought her to a hospital in nearby Hania. Considering her beyond saving, doctors offered no medical attention beyond an injection to painlessly end her life. But as Kartakis relates, "My family refused, but the doctor pushed them aside and gave me the needle anyway. For the second time, they thought I died — they even rang the bells of Panagia to tell the neighborhood."

And yet, touched again by some mysterious combination of will and



Despina Kartakis at the grave of her parents, Manuel and Maria Tapinakis, in Galatas, Crete.

fortune, she awoke in the hours preceding her own funeral and from there began her lifelong road to recovery.

The pitfalls along that road were many — she received no real treatment until 1960, and then only through the auspices of an American who arranged and financed a trip to Detroit. At Harper Hospital she began a series of bone and skin grafts, operations that were only partially successful. Still, against incomparable odds, during the course of her treatment she met Konstantinos Kartakis; the man who would become her husband.

"He was a bus driver who used to work in Hania," she says. "He happened to be in the hospital one day and recognized me. I'm pretty unforgettable to look at. Of course, romance was the last thing on my



Despina Kartakis returned to Crete to revisit the courage of her native land.

mind. I was undergoing my operations, 36 in total, and my focus was getting better. But he was persistent and came to look in on me every day."

Her daughter, Christina Joneson,

nods with a wistful sigh, imagining a fairy tale came true. "They were married for 30 years," she says. "Dad worshiped her. He used to wait for her by the window or on the porch every time she went out ..."

Kartakis adds, "Konstantinos always told me that to him, I was the most beautiful woman on earth. That got me through the worst times."

In May of this year, 66 years to the day after the tragedy, she returned to Galatas and revisited the site of the bombing and her premature burial, reconnecting with elderly neighbors she remembered from childhood. It was, however, her solemn pilgrimage to the cemetery where her brother, Yanni, and her parents are buried that convinced her to finally share her story in its heart wrenching entirety.

"I'm getting older," she says with

conviction, "it's time for the truth to be told."

The focus of a locally produced documentary, *Our Greek Story* — her experience is measured in tears and nightmares, but mostly, in compassion toward her as a human being — a remarkable survivor without malice even for men who attempted to destroy her. Driven not by anger at the German people, but by an interest that the courage of the Cretan people be preserved, she sees herself as emblematic of a struggle that in the end cost Greece 300,000 wartime casualties and nearly its entire Jewish population to the Holocaust.

"If any good could come of this," she maintains, touching her sunken cheek and ravaged shoulder, "it will be the lesson that perseverance and strength can win out over the most impossible circumstances."