

Η μεγάλη διάσωση

Remembering the great rescue

Almost 30 years after rescuing a Cypriot farmer from a Nicosia minefield, former AFP officer Jack Thurgar returned to Cyprus to reunite with the man whose life he saved.

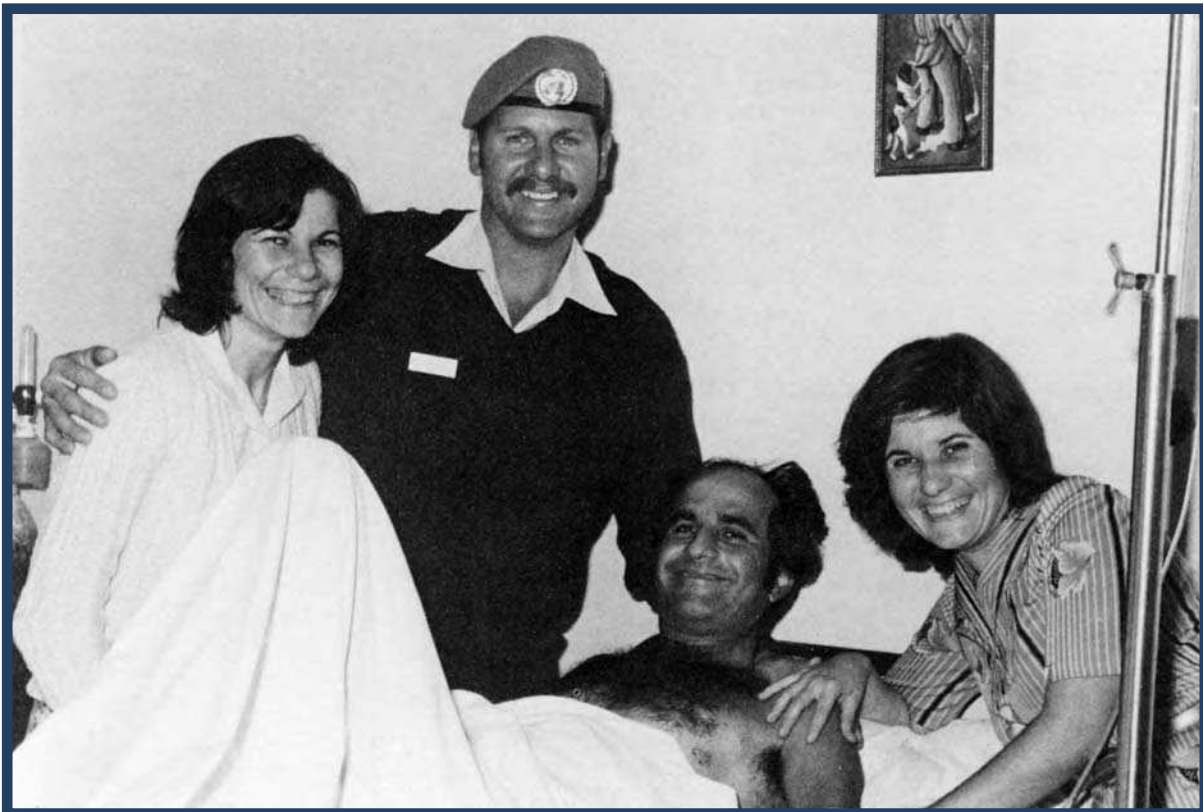
Jack travelled to Cyprus in April this year and met with Chrysos Seas amidst feelings of nostalgia and some trepidation. The two recalled

the day Jack risked his life by entering the minefield after seeing Chrysos' tractor explode. Although a victim of mines himself — Jack was injured in Vietnam in the early 1970s — he carefully followed tyre tracks to the seriously-wounded Chrysos, carrying him to safety.

Jack was awarded the Star of Courage by the Australian

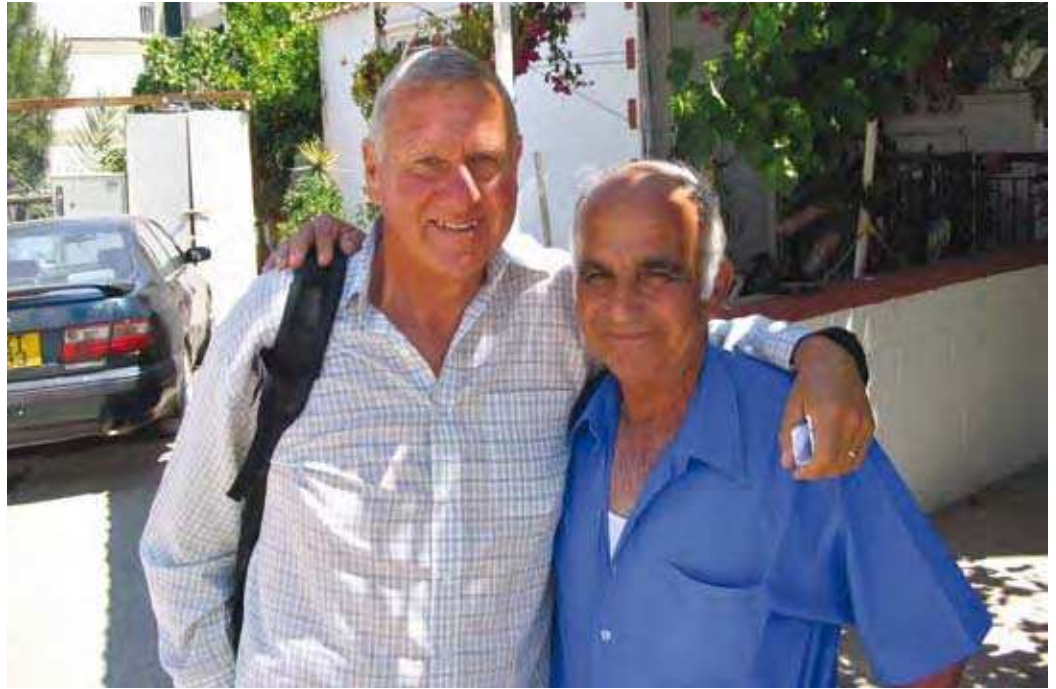
Government in February 1980, and was commemorated in 1997 for his act of bravery.

Jack, now a tour operator in the region, initiated the reunion after hearing Chrysos was ill. It was an emotional reunion, bringing both men face-to-face with memories of a day that changed their lives forever.



Then-Chief Inspector Jack Thurgar with Chrysos Seas and family after the rescue in 1979.

Jack Thurgar and Chrysos Seas reunited in April this year in Cyprus.



Words: Jack Thurgar

“ I had not seen Chrysos since leaving Cyprus in early 1980, while he was still recuperating from his injuries.

Our contact since then was limited to an annual exchange of Christmas cards — with minimal English. For many years his card would simply say, “To Jack, Merry Christmas, from Chrysos”. Later, as his children began to learn a little English, the cards contained just enough broken English to say “Merry Christmas, we are fine, how are you?”

Last Christmas I received a card from him indicating a serious health problem, though it was not clear if it was his head or his heart, (as he wrote he had problems with his “heard”). It sounded as though it may be life threatening and I was very concerned.

I didn’t have a telephone number for Chrysos or his family, so tried to find a listing through Telstra. I spoke to the exchange operator in Nicosia, but they were unable to find a listing under his name or address. I thought this unusual as I believed his address had not changed through the years.

I had an old envelope that had his address on the back written in Greek,

and it appeared to be the same area as the address he had given in English in subsequent years. I thought it was possible there was an error in the translation, so I sought assistance from some local Greeks in Canberra to compare the two addresses and found they were indeed the same.

As I could not contact him immediately by telephone, I wrote to him to clarify what his condition was. I did not receive an answer and, fearing the worst, I began to make further enquiries into his whereabouts.

I received a card from Chrysos indicating a serious health problem, though it was not clear if it was his head or his heart, (he wrote of problems with his “heard”).

The incident in the minefield in 1979 caused me great personal distress and trauma, and for 27 years I have avoided anything that could refresh those memories, even to the extent that I cannot drive a diesel-powered vehicle because it reminds me of the smell of diesel on Chrysos’ badly burnt body. Because of this, I had never entertained

the thought of a reunion with him, as I thought it would be too distressing for me.

However, fearing he may be terminally ill, and being unable to make contact with him, I was moved to visit Cyprus for what I believed may be a final opportunity to see him. I did not allow myself to have any feelings prior to the meeting, as I well understood that things don’t always go to plan in Cyprus.

I contacted Australian Police Contingent Commander in Cyprus Col Speedie, and was greatly relieved when

Col said he had tracked Chrysos down through the Cyprus Police and had visited him that day. I was even further relieved to hear Chrysos appeared to be in good health.

That afternoon came the long-awaited reunion. My heart lifted as Chrysos walked outside his home to greet me. Over coffee and much broken English,

AUSSIE CITED FOR BRAVERY

The editor of platypus gratefully acknowledges permission to reprint the following article in full from a recent issue of THE CYPRUS WEEKLY.

"Seeing the mines all around me made me even more nervous. Believe me I was shaking... my knees felt like jelly."

These are the words of a brave man, Chief Inspector Jack Thurgar, 56, the Australian police officer who risked his life earlier this month by walking into a minefield to rescue a seriously wounded Greek Cypriot farmer who had just been blown up.

Thurgar, a soft-spoken six-footer, is being cited for bravery. We have recommended him very highly for gallantry, the Acting Australian High Commissioner in Cyprus, Mike Griffin-Grimwade told the Cyprus Weekly.

It took a lot of persuading before Thurgar, of some New South Wales agreed to talk to the Cyprus Weekly about the rescue, described by a National Guard officer as a very brave act indeed.

"Remember it was my wife's birthday that day, and I had been her when I got home. She's used to the things I get up to, but then I never tell her anything until it's all over," he said.

On 8 October, he added, he was in the Omorphita suburb of Nicosia supervising some farming work going on in the buffer zone between the National Guard and Turkish occupation forces.

His main concern, as well as that of the National Guard, was to prevent any-

one straying into a large minefield. And that is precisely what happened.

"I saw an exhausted farmer — that is, a farmer who had not obtained clearance — purchasing post the National Guard position driving his tractor straight into the minefield. The gunkeeper yelled at him, obviously telling him to get out but he just went on," Thurgar said.

Cut in half

"He had hit around about 100 yards and tried to turn round for another run when his left rear tyre struck a land mine. It cut the tractor in half."

"The back part of the tractor and the driver were thrown some 30 ft up — it looked like a rocket, with bits of fuel and his tyres went shooting up."

"The driver, Chrysostomos Seas, of Arhonas, had hit the mine within two minutes of entering the minefield. His left arm was lacerated and he managed to get on to his elbow. He was trying to wave at us. I could see he was covered in oil and he was blackened all over from the oil and the blast."

"His shirt was completely blown apart from his body and the front of his shirt was completely peppered with small holes. The way he looked, I thought Jesus. He's had it."

Help

"He could not move his left arm or his feet. All he could do at this stage was put his right hand out in a gesture of help."

"Five years ago Chief Inspector Thurgar was blown up by mines in Vietnam and badly wounded but he does not like talking about it now. I've

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one great lump of raw meat hanging out. I could see other large gashes over his legs and his trousers were blown away. The man was still conscious. Perhaps he could not have done it on his own, but I'm sure he could see me.

"He tried to crawl across to me, holding his hand out, saying something incoherent. But I could not see his eyes. They could tell a story. I'd never in my whole life seen anything like it."

"I kept going and when I reached him he rolled from his side onto his back. I managed to get one arm under his

crutch and one under his head across the shoulders in a fireman's lift. He knew I had come for him but as it must have been very painful he was whimpering.

"I got him over my shoulder, and turning back trying to follow my foot-prints, but even so, together we were about 400 lb which would set off any mine if we were unlucky to step on one. The ground was hard and there were no tell-tale signs and I just had to take the chance. Also time was of such great importance that I had to take him out the short way — that is precisely the way you would expect the enemy to come in."

When Thurgar got the wounded farmer to where he thought was safe, the U.N. mine-clearance officer, Captain Kevin Delaney of Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) applied steel dressings on the man's wounds.

Exactly 13 minutes from the moment the tractor hit the mine, a U.N. helicopter had landed on the scene and Captain Delaney and Sergeant Officer Ian McGowan, also of Lord Strathcona's Horse, put the wounded farmer carefully on a stretcher and then into the helicopter.

Thurgar flew in the same helicopter "to keep the stretcher steady." They landed at Walsley Barracks and thence by truck to hospital. The entire operation, from the moment of the mine explosion to the time the man was accepted at the hospital, had taken half an hour.

It was a U.N. team effort that got him out: a combination of everybody's Thurgar said.

"When I got back to the mine I was filthy. My shirt was torn and although I've had it washed again and again, the stains of blood, oil and gun are still visible. I think I'll send it back to headquarters in Canberra to see if I can get a new one," he said.

Back at the Nicosia hospital, former Seas said: "A shirt? You tell him I'll give him my own life if necessary. There's no way of repaying him for what he did."

Mike Griffin-Grimwade and Thurgar have been to see him in hospital and Seas said: "They came to see me and brought flowers but it was so excited I can't remember which one of the two had brought the flowers or whether I thank-ed them."

Thurgar is presently serving a second term of duty with the Australian Police detachment at the U.N. peacekeeping force in the island.

He was last in Cyprus in 1977 — Cyprus Weekly.



The Cyprus Weekly ran this feature after the 1979 rescue.



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Toula expressed in broken English that Chrysos told how "Mr Jack" had come into the minefield, and had difficulty in picking him up — tugging at him to collect his dead-weight and limp, broken body.

he explained he had undergone a series of operations on the leg that he lost in the incident, and proudly demonstrated that he can now cross his legs thanks to advanced prosthetic limb technology.

He was also proud to show he still had full use of his arm which was badly injured, and the areas on his body which required extraction of mine fragments were now fully healed.

We looked at old photos, reminiscing about how fit and strong we had been — Chrysos' good health had surely helped his recovery. Unfortunately though it seemed the physical and emotional stress of the incident put undue strain on his heart, and he began having problems walking any distance without shortness of breath and chest pain. He had numerous hospital tests, and this had been what he tried to explain to me in last year's Christmas card.

Since Christmas, Chrysos has had a pacemaker fitted and is very optimistic about his future.

The reunion was the first time I had seen Chrysos' wife, Toula, and his two children since 1979, when I met them briefly at the hospital for a media photo shoot. At that time, it had been very awkward for all of us.

It was a somewhat reserved reunion as it was a little surreal, particularly when considering the enormity of the event and how different things could have been if there had been no rescue, or if it had not succeeded for both of us.

It was only later that my wife Hedonna told me that Toula had expressed privately to her in broken English that she remembered Chrysos explaining how "Mr Jack" had come into the minefield, and had difficulty in picking him up — tugging at him to collect his dead-weight and limp, broken body.

Toula indicated Chrysos did not understand immediately that "Mr Jack" was going to carry him out. She also said she had pictured Chrysos lying with his eyes closed after the explosion. My wife explained to her that in fact his eyes were open, and that at first I thought Chrysos was dead, but the moment I saw Chrysos' eyes were open, seemingly pleading with me, I knew I had to help him.

With tears in her eyes she expressed that if Chrysos had not survived, "kaput", it would have been "big problem" for her and "babies no food" without a father and husband.

In a message passed via the AFP's Commander Colin Speedie, Deputy Senior Advisor with the United Nations Force in Cyprus, Chrysos said the reunion brought back vivid memories for him, too.

"It was very emotional to see Jack again and it brought back many nostalgic memories," he said.

"I took Jack out to see the minefield he rescued me from and we were both in tears. Jack is one of the community's better individuals and I will never forget the fact that, although Jack has children and a family of his own, he still risked his life to enter the minefield to rescue me. I hope Jack will come back soon and spend more time here next time."