



# Nick Zoa

Iraklion Air Station  
Crete, Greece  
Term V, 1981

---

One of my favorite teaching assignments with the University of Maryland was the summer of 1981 on the island of Crete. That spring, I'd been teaching at the US Air Force base in Aviano, Italy. To get from there to Iraklion, Crete, I had orders to take a Military Airlift Command (MAC) flight. MAC was how Maryland's instructors – and their teaching materials – were shipped from base to base.

Flying MAC, I never knew in advance what sort of aircraft I'd be flying. Sometimes I might be on a big C-5. C-5's are cavernous, windowless, cargo planes. The seats are webbings on metal frames attached to the outside of the fuselage. C-5's have no heat. They are remarkably uncomfortable. They're also noisy and slow. The best C-5 flights were the flights where the cargo included tanks, jeeps and/or trucks. On those flights, after takeoff, the savvy passengers climbed inside the tanks, jeeps or trucks. The seats inside the vehicles were padded. Being inside a vehicle on the plane was also quieter and warmer.

For my flight from Aviano to Iraklion, I was on the "Nightingale," a 727 converted for use as a hospital plane. Its route circles from Germany to Italy to Greece to Turkey and back to Germany again. It was outfitted to accommodate soldiers with broken legs or patients strapped onto gurneys. For this reason, every other row of seats had been removed. It was luxurious to have so much legroom. I've never flown with so much legroom anywhere before or since. Even first class seats on modern planes don't have this much legroom.

My plane landed at Iraklion's civilian airport. I got off the plane. The University of Maryland's field representative welcomed me at the bottom of the stairs. We walked directly to her car and drove to the base. My passport was not stamped. The last stamp in my passport was my arrival into Italy with a Department of Defense work permit. Although this was before the formation of the European Union, it didn't occur to me that I might need a Greek entry stamp in my passport. This little detail was going to create a problem three months later when it came time for me to leave Greece. For now, I was just glad to be in Greece. The only thing on my mind was dinner.

Iraklion Air Station was located 10 miles east of the airport. Though an Air Force base, it was a non-flying facility. Its purpose was to provide administrative and logistical support to the 6931<sup>st</sup> Electronic Security Squadron. In other words, it was a place with lots of tall antennae that monitored radio communications in the Middle East. Many of my students were fluent in Russian, Arabic, Turkish or Kurdish. They spent their days inside bunkers underneath communication towers listening for suspicious radio communications. The fact that the air base didn't have its own airstrip was going to be my second problem three months later.

I taught Seismology and Astronomy for eight weeks at the base. There was a limestone cavern nearby where the seismology class went for a field trip. The warm, dry air made for excellent star gazing for the astronomy class at night.

At this base, Greek nationals were allowed to take classes with the University of Maryland. One of my favorite students was a 40ish woman named Popi Diamantakoy. She was a good student and asked very specific questions about the geologic hazards of Crete. She was also well-connected to local businesses and knew people who got things done. Popi's farm provided some of the produce sold at the base exchange. When we took our field trip to the cave, Popi arranged for our field trip to be catered. When we exited the cave, there was a long table setup under the olive trees covered with souvlaki, olives, dolmades, moussaka, tzatziki, melitzanosalata, and hummus. I fell in love Greek food.

I got to know Popi and her family well. I was invited to her home for a few meals because she wanted her children to have a chance to practice their English with a native English speaker. Popi was especially interested in having me teach her 18-year-old daughter Georgia how to speak English. Georgia was a stunning *néa gynáika*. She looked like a cross between a young Sophia Loren and Brook Shields. Greek food wasn't the only thing I fell in love with that summer.

The end of my teaching term coincided with national elections in Greece. Andreas Papandreou and his party swept into power in a landslide. During his campaign, Papandreou had promised to withdraw from NATO, to order U.S. troops and military bases out of Greece, and to imprison all the American contractors who had entered Greece illegally and were taking jobs away from Greeks.

There were only two Greek seismologists in Greece at that time. I knew them both because they'd been at the Berkeley Seismographic Station when I'd been there in the 70's. They were fully employed in Athens. So, although I wasn't taking any jobs away from any Greek nationals, my status as a military contractor in Greece was awkward.

I had an apartment off base. I was on base running errands and getting ready to leave Greece on the morning that the election results were announced. Immediately, a crowd of angry Greeks gathered at the entrance to the base. They were carrying scythes, pitchforks, shovels and other weapons of mass destruction. They were demanding the release of the American civilian working on the base so that they could escort me to jail.

I went to visit the JD (Juris Doctor) at the base's legal office. When I walked into his office, it seemed that he'd been expecting me. He closed his office door and told me quietly that the base had destroyed all records of my being there – for my protection. All I had to do was to find a way to get off the base and out of Greece without anyone seeing my passport. Since there was no airfield on the base, I couldn't leave Greece by military transport. The commercial airport was not an option either. As a consolation, I was free to remain on base inside the chain link fence as long as I liked. I was welcome to use the bank, the grocery and other facilities. I could sleep at the Bachelor Officer's Quarters if I wanted to. However, once I left base, I wouldn't be allowed back in.

As I left the JD's office, I noticed that the crowd outside the base had grown considerably. I wondered how does one leave a country without showing one's passport? On the way over to the BX for a snack, I happened to meet Popi. Like the JD, she also seemed to have been expecting to see me. Thankfully, she was more helpful than the JD. She said "Come with me. You help me. I help you. Everything will be okay."

We walked over to Popi's pickup truck. Together we unloaded several dozen cantaloupes and stacked them on the shelves inside the grocery. Then, Popi lifted the

canvas tarp she'd used to cover the cantaloupes. She said "Okay, now you get under here and act like a melon." At that point, I began to understand her plan. She fastened the tarp tightly over me, gave my head and my butt a farmer's squeeze, and then drove out of the grocery parking lot. I could tell by the increase in the noise level that we were approaching the base's main gate. The angry mob was chanting just outside.

As we exited the gate, Popi honked and hollered with all her friends, demanding the release of the American interloper. Then, she drove slowly through the crowd and took me to my apartment a few kilometers away. She kept a lookout while I ran inside and gathered a few of my possessions. She told me not to get everything because someone would come back later and get the rest.

Then with my little bag, I buried myself under the tarp again. We headed up into the hills towards her family's farm. When the pavement ran out, the ride got a little bumpy, but I was relieved to be getting farther and farther away from the scene that was unfolding at the base.



The valley of Lasithi, Crete

After about an hour, we arrived at Popi's farm. This wasn't the first time that I'd been up in these hills. I recognized the crests of the Valley of Lasithi in eastern Crete. There were bright green fields below, well-watered by the classic windmills that spun slowly in the breeze. At the center of the property were three or four ancient but well-maintained white farm houses with terra cotta tile roofs. These homes were surrounded by an olive orchard. From there, the hills sloped upwards covered with trellised grape vines. This would be my hideout for the next month.

Popi poured me some wine, and gave me a plate of bread and olives. Then she excused herself saying that she had to go collect more food. For the next hour or two, I sat alone enjoying the waning afternoon and the warm breezes out of North Africa. Then, Georgia arrived in her little blue Morris Minor. She liked to drive fast. Before I saw her I could tell it was her from the dust tornado she made as she skidded and fishtailed up the mountain to the farm. Georgia jumped out of her car, ran over to me and gave me a big kiss. She then produced my luggage, my school materials, my books and the rest of my clothes. Inside the big house, she showed me where my room was, which was adjacent to hers.



Later, while we were relaxing with our wine, bread and olives, I noticed an old woman dressed in black stirring the fire. I asked Georgia who this woman was. Georgia was proud to tell me that this was her *yiayia*, her grandmother. The old woman was then joined by another smaller woman also dressed in black who was even more hunched over than Georgia's *yiayia*. "And who is that?" I asked. Georgia said "my *proyiayia*, my great-grandmother." The two women sat on the stones drinking their tea looking over the valley where their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were working in the orchards and the fields. I can still picture this unforgettable moment.

I spent the next month in total Greek immersion. Georgia and her mother were the only English speakers. I was a helper on the farm and a member of the family. I picked grapes. I worked the olive press. I cleaned the irrigation ditches. I patched a roof or two. It was wonderfully satisfying work. Working with Popi's nephews, I learned a lot of Greek.

At sunset, everyone gathered in the courtyard between the two largest farm houses. Long dining tables were placed end to end and covered with white sheets. Women laid out huge feasts on the table. There were usually about twenty people at our table. Dinner started as evening fell and went long into the night. First there'd be the sounds of eating and drinking. Spirited conversations led to lively debates and eventually to laughter. Someone would bring out a mandolin, accompanied soon by a couple of bazoukis. The singing would begin, followed by dancing on the flagstone courtyard. Candles and oil lamps provided illumination. The shadows of the dancers played across the white walls of the farm houses.

Within a month, the political situation in Greece calmed down. It was time for me to leave Crete. I still had a problem with my passport which the military JD couldn't solve for me. I took the ferry to Athens to ask for assistance from the American embassy. They couldn't help me either.

While in Athens, I went to an "American restaurant" hungry for a hamburger and a beer. Having lived in Greece for three months, I casually greeted the maitre'd in Greek. He immediately blocked my path and explained that I couldn't eat there. This was a restaurant for tourists only. I switched to English and told him that I was an American. He asked for my passport, which I'd left at the hotel for safekeeping. He said "I don't know where you learned your English, but you're from Crete." I persisted for a few more minutes but finally shrugged off with *antio sas* (goodbye). I took pride in having learned to speak Greek well enough to convince an Athenian that I was a Cretan.

Since leaving Greece, I've had few occasions to speak Greek. Someday, I'll return to Crete. When I do, I hope to recover the Greek language skills buried somewhere deep inside my skull. It was a language that seemed to come to me naturally.

While I was in Athens, Popi and her husband devised a covert way for me to get out of Greece. Popi's husband worked at the Iraklion port authority. I went with him one day to the offices down on the wharf. There, I met with all the stevedores and customs officials. For a few hours, I sat in their sparse office drinking Greek coffee (the bottom half of which is as thick as mud) and smoking cigarettes (the only time in my life that I've ever smoked). The dock hands and I got to know each other making small talk well into the afternoon.

They all agreed finally that with a name like Nick Zoa I was clearly Greek or had Greek ancestry. My spoken Greek was good enough to convince anyone that I was from Crete. The fact that I had an American passport was irrelevant. I was one of them. It was decided therefore that I should come back the next morning when the cruise ship came through.

I had one more starry night on Popi's farm up in the Valley of Lasithi. After the eating, the singing and the dancing were done, the dishes washed and the leftovers put away, I went upstairs with Georgia. The sheer white curtains billowed in the tall windows as the breezes from North Africa wafted through our rooms.

Georgia's father woke me at about 4:00am. It was still dark. As planned, I got dressed, picked up a small leather pouch containing my passport, toothbrush, camera and a paperback copy of Ted Simon's *Jupiter's Travels*. In the darkness, we drove down the mountain to the port authority.

There, shining like a floating office building, was a huge white cruise ship. (Actually, the ship wasn't that big. It just looked huge sitting next to Iraklion's small pier in the dark.) It was the *Dana Sirena* arriving from Brindisi, Italy. I shook hands with the same sturdy fellows that I'd had coffee and cigarettes with the day before. Now, we were all stevedores handling luggage, freight and supplies.



The *Dana Sirena* sank in the Red Sea in 1983.

Our final job was to load a pallet of Popi's cantaloupes into the ship. The crew employed a big yellow crane to hoist pallets from the dock into the ship's hold. We had to stack the cantaloupes so that they would stay on the pallet and not fall into the water while being lifted from the dock into the ship. There was only one way to ensure that all the melons ended up where they needed to go. Someone had to stand on the pallet and hold the melons to keep them from rolling off. That would be me.

Georgia's father handed me my travel pouch and gave me a wink. I stepped onto the pallet and was lifted from the dock up about 20 meters into the air and then down into the ship's hold. We didn't lose any cantaloupes.

Once aboard the ship, I unloaded the cantaloupes. I heard the ship's horn blast once. A crewmember directed me to the gangplank to exit the ship. I knew what I had to do. When I was out of sight of the ship's crew, I ducked into a head, closed and locked the door, and opened *Jupiter's Travels*. I heard the ship start its engines. The dockhands called to each other as they threw off the lines. By the time I'd read the first three chapters, I could feel the ship rocking gently. We were at sea. I emerged from the head and went to the bar.

At this point, it was now about 8:00am. Although the sun had barely risen, the bar was packed and voices were loud. I heard British voices. I moved in to see what was going on. Here was an English rugby team on tour through the Middle East. After playing a few matches in Italy, they were now on their way to Egypt for a brief cultural tour of Egyptian highlights. I quenched my thirst with a beer, had pretzels for breakfast and got to know these fellows.

I told them my story about how I'd ended up on the *Dana Sirena*. They grinned and then shared their news: When they left England, they were a team of 40. But one of their teammates had met a woman in Brindisi and had missed the boat yesterday. Now, they needed one more man to complete their team. They handed me the key to his stateroom, his meal coupons, his pass to the Egyptian museum in Cairo and his ticket to the Sound & Light show at the Pyramids. Naturally, I bought the next round. For the rest of the cruise, except when I was sleeping in my stateroom, I was with the rugby players in the bar or by the pool.

I still wasn't sure what was going to happen when our ship arrived in Alexandria. So, I paid a visit to the ship's purser. He happened to be from Avignon, a picturesque town in southern France where I spent the summer of 1973. When I told the purser – in French, of course – that I'd studied in Avignon and lived with the Olivier family, he immediately brightened and assured me "*ne t'inquiète pas*" (don't worry).

Two mornings later, the *Dana Sirena* docked in Alexandria. Most of the passengers queued up for the long and bureaucratic process of going through Egyptian immigration and passport control. Meanwhile, the French purser corralled the rowdy rugby players for whom special arrangements had been made for our tour. We exited the *Dana Sirena* via a VIP gangplank. At the bottom of the ramp was an air conditioned tour bus. There were 40 seats. We filled it nicely. At this point, I was carrying my satchel which was all the luggage I had for the next two months.

We started with a tour and lunch at the papyrus factory. From there, our bus drove us to the Egyptian museum in Cairo. After a big dinner at a western hotel, we headed out to the Pyramids for the glamorous Sound & Light show. The sphinx was brilliantly

illuminated at the end. As the music faded, our Egyptian guide marched us back to our tour bus. With our one-day tour of Egypt completed, we were all supposed to board the bus and go back to the *Dana Sirena*.

Except for me. The French purser had suggested that I would need to leave the tour at some point. This seemed to be a good time. So, I said to our guide “Thank you for being an excellent guide today. I love Egypt. I think I’ll stay here.”

The guide looked perplexed and then annoyed. His job was to ensure that everyone got back on the bus. He put his hand on the holster attached to his hip and said “No. You must go back to boat now.”

I smiled as I reached for my wallet. I said *shukraan* (thank you) again for an excellent tour and offered him a crisp \$5 bill. This seemed to resolve the matter. He smiled, took my \$5, shrugged his shoulders and said “Okay, you can stay.” The tour bus closed its doors. I waved to my fellow rugby players as their bus drove off into the night.



The Sound & Lights show at the Pyramids