

Jackson on Holiday in Athens, December 22, 1945

*John Q. Barrett**

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At the end of its trial day on Thursday, December 20, 1945, the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in Allied-occupied former Germany began a holiday recess that would last twelve days. Justice Robert H. Jackson, the United States chief prosecutor, had objected strenuously when the Tribunal proposed this lengthy break—he urged the IMT, only one month into the trial of the principal accused Nazi war criminals, to work right through the holidays (except for a day off on Christmas). The IMT, however, rejected Jackson’s suggestion. As he wrote privately, his proposal to forgo holiday vacation was “nothing doing with the French + British so near home.”

During his unsought holiday recess, Justice Jackson released many of his staff to use United States Army recreation facilities, including ski slopes, in the Bavarian Alps near Berchtesgaden. Jackson also arranged for himself and his core assistants—executive officer Col. Robert J. Gill; attorneys Gordon E. Dean, Capt. Roger Barrett (no relation) and executive assistant and attorney (and RHJ relative—his son) Lt. William E. Jackson; special assistant Capt. John Vonetes; and secretaries Elsie Douglas and Jean MacFetridge—to travel south of the Alps, by military airplane, to sunshine and sights around the Mediterranean. They were away from Nuremberg from December 21st until the afternoon of New Year’s Eve. Their stops included Rome, Athens, Cairo, Jerusalem, Bethlehem (on Christmas Eve), Luxor, Cairo (again), Malta, Nice, Monte Carlo and Cannes.

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Justice Jackson and his U.S. colleagues arrived in Greece on December 22, 1945. After landing at a joint U.S.-British airfield outside Athens, they were driven into the city and checked into its finest hotel, the

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Hotel Grande Bretagne on Síntagma (“constitution”) square. They found that “the GB,” heavily guarded by British troops, was in poor shape due to looting during Germany’s occupation of Greece. Water also was scarce.

That afternoon, United States embassy officials drove Jackson and company from the Grande Bretagne to see some of Athens. They paid respects at the unknown Greek soldier’s tomb, where they saw military guards wearing traditional flared shirts and white stockings. Jackson and group drove past Sophocles’s theater at the foot of the Acropolis. They visited Areopagos Hill, from which Paul once preached against Athenian idolatry.¹ Jackson, while visiting this site, discussed the biblical history. (I have found no evidence that he also discussed Areopagos’s function during classical times as Athens’s chief homicide court, or that Areopagos reputedly was, even earlier, the site of a war criminal’s trial: the Greek gods trying Ares himself, the god of warfare, for the murder of Poseidon’s son Alirrothios.)

From the top of the Acropolis, Justice Jackson and his team viewed the Parthenon and other temple ruins. They also took in the magnificent views of Athens in setting sunlight. After they returned to the Hotel, the younger men (Bill Jackson, Roger Barrett and John Vonetes) had a drink at the King George hotel next door. Bill Jackson also bought fresh oranges and tangerines, his first in many months.

That evening, United States Ambassador Lincoln MacVeagh hosted a cocktail party at his residence for Justice Jackson and his group.² Other guests included the British ambassador, the Canadian ambassador and Greek government officials, including Minister of Foreign Affairs John Sofianopoulos. Following cocktails, Justice Jackson, Gill and Dean remained at Ambassador MacVeagh’s residence for a VIP dinner while an embassy staff officer took Bill Jackson, Vonetes and others to “the best restaurant in Athens.”

Later, as Justice Jackson and the seniors retired to the Hotel Grande Bretagne, Bill Jackson and John Vonetes continued their night on the town. They delivered a holiday gift to Constantine (Dino) Doxiades, a friend who soon would become Greece’s Minister of Reconstruction, at his apartment.

¹ See Acts 17: 16-34.

² AMBASSADOR MACVEAGH REPORTS: GREECE, 1933-1947 (John O. Iatrides, ed., 1980), a comprehensive and impressive work, includes no MacVeagh diary entry from this period or mentioning Jackson. Dr. Iatrides, the editor, confirmed to me that none exists.

They also, with another Greek friend, collected whiskey, tobacco, food and candy and delivered all of that, plus clothes that Vonetes had brought with him on the trip, as gifts to Sofianopoulos and his wife at their apartment. (Vonetes, who had a special touch with people and amazing talents in the realm of procuring scarce goods, had become friendly with Doxiades and Sofianopoulos the previous summer at the international conference in San Francisco that established the United Nations.)

After one more stop with embassy personnel at a nightclub, Bill Jackson returned to the Hotel Grande Bretagne and called it a night (or a morning). Vonetes continued to other clubs and, perhaps only coincidentally, he became very ill with pneumonia only a few days later.

The next morning, Bill Jackson and John Vonetes, and perhaps also Justice Jackson, had breakfast and serious conversation with Dino Doxiades. He told them about experiences during the Nazi occupation of Greece, including starvation conditions and burnings of whole villages as reprisals for resistance activity. He praised the Allied, including Justice Jackson's, prosecutorial efforts at Nuremberg and announced plans to send a Greek reporter to cover the remainder of the trial.

Justice Jackson had a chance that morning to see a bit more of Athens. Before noon, he and his companions took off for Cairo. As their plane approached, it flew low and circled over pyramids and the Sphinx.