Recently returned from an historic Tour of Greece and Turkey, Asquith Boys High School covered themselves in Glory both on and off the football field.

Expectation was high among the Tourists as the Channel 7 cameras rolled at the Airport prior to our departure and on the long haul over to Athens, the boys found it very hard to sleep. The adrenalin continued as Christos, our driver who we met on our trip two years earlier, greeted us all warmly. What a great fellow he is!

It was good to see a familiar face. As we caught up on the recent news, he drove us through the narrow Athenian streets to our hotel, the ‘Golden City’, right in the heart of Athens. After a good sleep – even with the cacophony of horns throughout - and a hearty breakfast, we set off on a walking Tour to better understand our new hosts. It was clear that the “Hells, bells and smells”, the Athens of the past few years, was rapidly being transformed by the Local Government – Graffiti removed, more police presence and a feeling of calm was evident and we all moved slowly through the city. Syntagma - Parliament Square and the “Evzones” – the Greek Palace Guards were photographed as were the hundreds of pigeons and lo and behold “Glyki” – the dog we befriended two years earlier joined us for the walk through laneways to the Flea Market and our first chance to help the struggling Greek economy by spending Euros! Lunch on the run – delicious souvlaki and Gyros rolls, huge strawberries and chestnuts all for a pittance. Our trip home through the meat and fish markets was an eye opener for many of the boys who had never seen meat outside of a processed packet.
That afternoon in our first game, we played a Team from coastal Athens – Faliro, on the second day. Jet lagged, we lost 0-2 but the seniors played well and showed promise. We were not disappointed and it was a classy game. Later, we paid our respects to the Allied War Cemetery.

We had Team Meetings each morning to discuss what had happened the day before and announce the daily awards. A room was set aside by our very friendly hosts at the hotel – a staff who could not believe the manners and politeness of all our charges, so much so that Calliope made us special chocolate desserts daily and we left an indelible positive image on all we met. As we had a quiet day, we decided to go the Flea Markets again and spend more Euros…oh well!

After a Trip to the Temple of Poseidon at Sounion the next day and an early dinner at “Goodies” – a Macca’s like food stop, it was on to Melissia for our first junior match under lights. Unfortunately, due to a mix up, our juniors played an older side and lost 1-4. The highlight was a boomer goal from Nick Miller whose shot cannoned the back of the net from a good 20 metres.

We rose early on the Saturday for a long Trip to Delphi, stopping first at the famous site of the 300 Spartans – Thermopylae. Here, we retraced that epic battle, stopping at the Statue of Leonidas and walking up the hill to the defensive wall that the Spartans improvised for their heroic stand. We marvelled at the scenery as we drove up to Delphi and once there, were transfixed by the idyllic sight that we saw. Temples and Stadia glistened in the sunlight under the calm protection of Mt. Parnassus and our guide, Penelope, was enthusiastic and understanding in her descriptions. A hungry group then said their hasty goodbyes and drove down to Arahova where we feasted at a Chalet on food so splendid and tasty you’d think it was prepared by the gods themselves. (Five courses and it still kept coming…) Where the teachers couldn’t find room for another morsel, the boys still found the effort to tuck into ice creams on the way back!

Sunday was Acropolis day and it was truly inspirational as we visited the Birth of Democracy. All the boys have memories of that visit that will last for the rest of their lives and after a walk through the Ancient Agora, we found ourselves back at the Flea Market and more Euros to spend. Oh well…!
After a training run at Kyfissia and a visit to the Panathenaic Stadium, we prepared for a real treat. John Lepouris, Chris’ son from Premium Holidays, had arranged tickets for us at the Stadium ‘Karaiskaki; that evening – home of Olympiacos and in the secure visitors’ surroundings, we took in a typical European Football match and absorbed memories of 30,000 colour waving, football singing, streamer throwing and flares holding ecstatic fans, celebrating with them the Championship.

Back to the Hotel to pack was the last instruction given.

The flight to Istanbul the next morning was short by comparison. We were met by rain and cold – quite the opposite of Athens and Recep our Guide for the next four days, was most welcoming. The bus trip to Canakkale took a good five hours and we arrived quite late to our new quarters – the Tuscan Resort by the entrance to the Bosporus. A charming Resort, this was to be our home for the duration and after a late dinner the boys quickly reconnoitred the place – huge Dining room, clean rooms, games room and pool – pool…? Oh well (again).

The Senior Tournament had begun and in our absence Dardanelles had beaten Canakkale that afternoon but the score had been close and we reasoned that a hard fought match with no quarter given would be in store for us on Wednesday afternoon – the day we were due to visit Gallipoli. Although it rained the next morning, we sussed out a Gym and trained indoors. All the boys put it in for about two hours and as we trained, we were viewed inquisitively by some shy little children whom we later found out were Kurds, displaced by the awful earthquake in Van last year. Many were destitute and orphaned and it was quite a cheery yet emotional experience as we handed out our Koalas to them. They took them, smiling eagerly and we became friends through these small tokens – we were told that for some it was the first smile they had shown since the terror of the catastrophe that had shaken their tiny lives.

The next morning was for all the culmination of the Tour – our pilgrimage to Gallipoli and the visit to ANZAC Cove.

Through the breaking dawn we boarded the ferry for the trip across to the Peninsula. As the Anatolian sun warmed the deck and its emerging light awakened the day, we ventured out to take early photographs, only to be besieged by sellers plying their tee shirts and other trinkets. The boys couldn’t refuse a bargain and again spent big… Oh well!

Gallipoli was a sight to behold. This was serenity encapsulated. As we were the only ones at ANZAC Cove that morning, it was a privilege to honour the Fallen without the chatter of others and as we moved through one of the 31 cemeteries on the landings, we addressed the
scene. At the ANZAC Cemetery, row after tendered row of graves was visited and you could see the boys stop and ponder. They relived the Landing in their own minds and were visibly affected. The Ataturk Speech to the Fallen (in 1934) was communicated and explained and all the boys had minute’s silence at the spot. We continued, attending the Lone Pine Memorial, reflecting the Battle that took place, took in the Sphinx, the Nek and the wondrous Statue of Respect for Turkish Soldiers. The Ataturk Statue, alone in its vision of the Aegean, was iconic.

As we arrived at the municipal Stadium after lunch, we were greeted by about 500 school children whose lunch time it just also happened to be. We were so popular; the teachers found it impossible to get them back into the classroom and gave up. Seniors first and after Jonesy prepared them we went to the Dressing Room for the final “inspirational” speech. Duly focussed, out we came only to be a goal down after three minutes! Oh well…! But the gods were with us and James Thompson’s head and right boot came to the fore scoring three glorious goals in five minutes. They threw everything at us in the second half but the all the boys were determined not to let this get away – we won 3-1 and achieved the outcome we set ourselves nine months ago. An historic victory on Turkish soil!

The Juniors played well in the later match but were outclassed; although Nicky Miller’s second goal on Tour was another ‘special’ as the found the pigeon on the net from a direct free kick.

Both these games were filmed on local Turkish television and we were surprised two days later to be recognised by Kurdish travellers at the Airport in Istanbul as we left for home. Amazing!

Our last matches had diplomatic outcomes. Realising the strength of our side, the Dardanelles team put on their best and defeated us the next day. Although tired and plagued with injuries, we have no excuses, losing to a better side who won the Tournament. The junior team tried very hard to balance the outcome but lost, although a fine goal by Jeff Williams was the highlight for us.

Sinan Bey, the Regional President of the Turkish Youth Football, was glowing in his praise of the efforts of our boys over the last two days and with the exchange of Presentations, we
made many new friends. We were honoured to see Turkish and Australian Diplomats at the games as well as the marketing team from Continental Tyres (Turkey).

That night at the Resort, we had our Presentation Night and it was impossible to judge a Best Player in either team – all boys had participated and played so well.

How do you end this Historic Visit?

The boys we took showed not only a dedication to the Principles of the Tour but to their own personal pride and in their School and their Nation. Their behaviour was exemplary. On the field we were never disgraced. They walked the paths of the Fallen and absorbed the emotive events of the past. They admired and reflected at the Historic places they visited – Sounion, Thermopylae, Delphi, the Acropolis and Troy – and touched at the very foundations of human Heritage.

They experienced an event that as the ANZAC’s recounted was “…larger than life itself…” They stood up to be counted and won out in all respects.

It was a privilege for Mike Blackwood, Drew Jones and I to be a part of this rite of passage with you all, boys…gentlemen.

Thank you.

George Moscos April 2012.