

HRISTO KONTOYIANNIS: the first Kalymnian diver to die in Broome, Australia in May 1956

Pearling in the North of Australia was a profitable business since the middle of the 19th century. However after World War II the industry was struggling to regain its lost markets. In addition, the Australian Government (and the Australian public) were mistrustful of the Japanese divers, who until then comprised the majority of the divers.

Whilst these events were happening in Australia, on the other side of the world, in the Aegean sea, a small Greek island was suffering a major economic depression. The island was linked for centuries with the sponge, a natural sea product that grows prolifically in the waters of the Aegean sea and the Mediterranean sea especially near Libya.

Sponge diving and processing was the main employment for the men of this island for centuries. The Kalymnians were so good at it that if you mentioned the word "sfougrades -sponge divers" in Greece everybody associates it with Kalymnos.

World War II saw the closure of the North African coast and the sponge industry was virtually dead for 5-6 years. When it started to pick up again, following the end of the war, Libya closed its coast and in the early 50s the first synthetic sponge started to appear on the market. Soon the market was flooded with the cheaper man made sponges and the island of Kalymnos sank into an economic depression.

Hundreds of young men lost their jobs and they were desperate to leave the island seeking better fortune.

The Australian authors Charmain Clift and George Johnston visited the island in the 50s and their book "The sponge divers" captures the atmosphere of the island in those difficult times.

Meanwhile the Australian government was looking to find suitable alternative for the Japanese divers in the pearling industry in the North of the Country. The fear of the yellow peril together with the official policy of the day, the "White Australia" policy en-

sured that no Asian islanders or other Asian divers were brought in to replace the Japanese.

It was in Sydney, that members of the city's Kalymnian brotherhood heard about the need for divers and immedi-



ately approached the Australian government with the proposal to bring Greek divers from Kalymnos to be employed in the pearling industry.

The Australian authorities could not believe their luck, the proposed migrants were white Europeans, experienced divers and there was a strong Greek community in Australia that had proved that they were hard working, peace loving people who had integrated well into the Australian society.

At the same time the news in Kalymnos were seen as a gift from God.

"All Kalymnos is unsettled, restless, drunk with these ridiculous hopes and expectations? If it's handled right we'll all be able to go to Australia? There'll be plenty of work for everyone, good money, nobody will go hungry."

(The sponge-divers).

In Broome, the capital of the pearling industry, pearl lugger operators (some of them Greek) were asked by Australian government officials what they

came entangled in the lugger's propeller shaft. Unfortunately Hristos Kontoyiannis was not so lucky, the propeller of the



phyxiation.

His death brought to the surface the ill feelings from the lugger operators who were unhappy about losing the cheap Japanese labor, but at the same time there were rumours among the Greek divers that Kontoyiannis' death was not as accidental as it appeared to be.

In 1976 the dead diver's son arrived from Greece to retrieve his father's bones (according to the Greek customs) and despite his efforts to uncover the real story, nothing was achieved. He returned to Greece still unconvinced that the coroner's report regarding his father's death was not as thorough as it should have been.

This controversy still haunts the minds of the handful of the original Kalymnian divers who have retired and now live in Darwin.

lugger Postboy cut his air supply line and he died from as-

thought of the idea. George Haritos, a pearl lugger owner recalls:

"We were asked if anyone wanted Greek divers, Paspaley, Gonzales, Billy Sing, Curly Bell and ourselves decided to give the Kalymnian divers a try".

COMING TO AUSTRALIA

In 1952 two diving teams arrived in Australia, with their passages arranged and their expenses paid by the Australian government. One team was dispatched in Broome while the other was brought to Darwin. Unfortunately the project was a complete failure. The Kalymnian divers despite their skills were unaccustomed to the treacherous seas of the tropical north, with its extreme tides of 7 or more meters, the dangerous sea life, the use of a half body diving suit and the industry's bad safety record.

Theo Halkitis nearly lost his life when his air supply line be-

CAR FOR SALE



SUZUKI BALENO

Model 1999 - 3Doors - Manual
Very Good Condition
Full Service Log Book
Air Condition - Sony MP3 Audio System

\$ 5,300

Call: **0406 581 384**