



BRITISH SAILORS BOARDING A GREEK PIRATE.

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«In a strange land, the stranger finds a grave,  
Far from his home, across the rolling wave»

Dr Panayiotis Diamadis

It was 27 August 1829 when seven young convicts set foot in the Sydney Cove penal colony. Convicted of piracy and condemned to seven years transportation, they were the first documented Hellenes to land in Australia. They became the forefathers of the Australian Hellenic community, which now numbers in the hundreds of thousands. The story of how they came to be in the Great Southern Land is as fascinating as what happened to them afterwards.

It was July 1827. The Hellenic War of Independence was raging on land and sea as the Hellenes struggled to liberate themselves from centuries of Ottoman domination. A lone schooner, the *Herakles* from the islands of the Saronic Gulf, between modern Athens and Peloponnesos, attacked the brig *Alceste* in the waters south of Krete. Seven of the *Herakles*' sailors boarded the vessel, stealing some ropes and charts in addition to removing a share of the cargo. The *Alceste* was transporting military supplies from Malta to Alexandria in Ottoman-ruled Egypt, and therefore a legitimate military target.

However, as the *Alceste* was Maltese-owned – and therefore British, the Royal Navy set off in pursuit. The *Herakles* was intercepted by HMS *Cygnets* during an anti-pirate patrol off Krete. The seven crew members who had boarded the *Alceste* were arrested and taken to Malta.

The seven were tried with offences against the Crown (smuggling and theft) and sentenced to death. This was commuted to transportation to Sydney colony. The judge was Admiral Edward Codrington, the man who led a combined British, French and Russian fleet in destroying the Turkish-Egyptian navy at the Battle of Navarino<sup>1</sup> (20 October 1827).

The seven 'pirates' departed Malta aboard the *Norfolk* on 20 May 1829, arriving in Sydney on 27 August. This therefore has come to be marked as the 'birthday' of the Australian Hellenic community. They were recorded as *Andini Tu Manolis* (*Antonios tou Manoli*), *Damianos Ninas*, *Jorghis Vassilachis* (*Georgios Vassilakis*), *Ghicas Bulgaris* (*Ghikas Voulagris*), *Jorghis Larezzos* (*Georgios Laretzos* or *Laritsos*), *Nicholas Papandross*, *Constantis Strombolis*.

Initially, their maritime skills were put to use in the colonial shipyards. The colony's surveyor, Major Mitchell, once walked through the garden of John Macarthur, near Parramatta, and later remarked that he had seen 'Greek pirates at work, training vines to trellises which had just been erected according to the manner of their country'. Antonis was assigned as convict labour to the vineyards on the estate of William Macarthur at Camden<sup>2</sup>.

Having served their full terms, and following requests for their release and repatriation from the government of the newly-formed Hellenic King-