

**AN ADDRESS FOR THE ANNUAL TASMANIAN SEAFARERS'
MEMORIAL SERVICE
BY
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GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
TRIABUNNA - SUNDAY 21st OCTOBER 2012**

It is perhaps inevitable that island communities such as ours must experience a share of the loss of men and ships to the relentless and demanding seas that surround our State.

This lesson was learned very quickly during the colonial period of our settlement as Britain came to understand that the patriotic fervour and national confidence engendered by the lines “Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves” were of little comfort when negotiating the gales of the great southern ocean, or navigating around the rugged coastline of *Terra Australis*.

Evidence of these challenges and the consequent loss of lives is to be found in the enormous number of shipwrecks that litter our coastline. Two hundred years on we have learned to respect the southern ocean and to never be complacent. We have chartered its waters and with advancements in ship construction, safety regulations and enhanced weather reporting the risks associated with going to sea have been greatly reduced. But there is still no guarantee of safety.

The recent loss of two experienced young fishermen on the West Coast demonstrates that the sea will not be tamed and will forever remain a unique and very dangerous environment. We feel the loss of those two young men as a community very keenly, not only because of their relative youth and the abrupt

suddenness of their deaths, but also because the sea gave up only one body for the families to mourn.

These modern tragedies remind us of the great dangers faced by the earliest immigrants to this country; travelling not only through unfamiliar and uncharted waters but well beyond any expectation of help should anything go wrong.

As the late author Robert Hughes said so poignantly in his book the “The Fatal Shore” when chronicling the transportation of convicts to Australia on the First Fleet in 1787:

“Before them yawned a terrifying void of time and space. They were going on the longest voyage ever attempted by so large a group of people. If they had been told they were off to the moon, the sense of loss, deracination and fear could hardly have been worse – at least one could see the moon from England, which could not be said for Botany Bay.”¹

We are here today to remember one of those many pioneering ships and crew that helped to build the new nation by transporting people and goods between the various colonies but which unfortunately fell victim to the unforgiving coastline of Van Dieman’s Land. On this day, on the 21st October 1848, the 177 ton Brig *Governor Phillip* set sail from Sydney for Hobart Town with 85 passengers including settlers being transferred from the defunct colony at Norfolk Island, crew members, convicts and their guard.

At 2:45 a.m. on the 27th October the ship struck a reef off Gull Island near Cape Barren Island in Bass Strait. The Captain acted appropriately and despite

¹ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, p.77.

the darkness attempted to get the passengers and crew off the vessel to the relative safety of Gull Island, about a quarter of a mile away. Unfortunately the first boat to be lowered, with two crew members on board, was smashed to pieces by a large wave and the two unfortunate crewmen perished. Two larger boats were lowered; the whaleboat for the women and children and the long boat for some of the convicts and their guard, with clear instructions to keep clear of the wreck until daylight.

When the light allowed Captain Cobham personally guided the whaleboat safely through the breakers to shore, but by the time he returned to his ship he discovered the masts had sheared off about two feet above the deck.

It is not uncommon in these life threatening situations for some people to demonstrate the higher qualities of human nature, and on this occasion selflessness and bravery was exemplified by Lieutenant Ernest Frederick Griffiths of the 96th Regiment. Lieutenant Griffiths remained on the deck of rapidly disintegrating ship until all others, including the prisoners had made their way off the ship. I quote from a report by the Lieutenant Colonel of his regiment citing his extraordinary courage and adherence to duty;

“His Excellency the Major General Commanding is desirous to record his deep regret at the loss of Lieutenant Ernest Frederick Griffiths. To hold up to the admiration of the officers and troops in this command, the heroic and exemplary conduct of this lamented and excellent young officer. On this fearful occasion the courage and presence of mind of Lt. Griffiths never deserted him, they were actively devoted to the safety of the escort and convicts under his charge; knocking off the irons of the latter with his own hands. Finally when almost the last person on the wreck; threw away perhaps the only chance of

preserving his own life by attempting to save that of his servant. . . he leaped into the sea and had nearly reached the shore by swimming when death overtook him.”

Thanks to the efforts of Lt. Griffiths and others most of the crew, passengers and prisoners survived the sinking but they had then to contend with exposure to the elements and await rescue. To achieve this they progressively transported themselves from island to island seeking a more suitable shelter and help. Very few provisions were salvaged from the ship and so they relied on the limited food sources available to them, namely shellfish and penguins, the latter of which in the words of one of the survivors they found to be “*anything but a delicacy*” and caused them severe diarrhea.

One of the survivor’s recorded how fortunate they were upon finally reaching Clarke Island “*We were met by three black women who treated us with exceeding kindness and hospitality, regaling us with damper and pork and native tea. I shall never forget the joy which I experienced on reaching a habitation and meeting with such genuine hospitality*”

For the survivors of terrible events like this one, their lives continue and their families and friends can move on from the trauma and be spared the trauma of spending lonely evenings alone, pondering what may have happened to their loved ones in the last moments of their lives.

However, for those poor souls who were lost at sea and particularly for those whose bodies have never been found, this memorial is for them and their friends and families. It is a place to come and remember them.