

The Little Ship That Saved Australia

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The first fleet -- that fleet of ships which brought the first white settlers from England to Australia -- numbered eleven ships.

Six of these ships were convict transports, specially fitted out to carry prisoners from overcrowded English gaols to far away New South Wales to establish a British colony. The convict transports were the *Lady Penrhyn*, *Charlotte*, *Prince of Wales*, *Alexander*, *Friendship* and *Scarborough*. They were handsome ships. The *Lady Penrhyn* and the *Prince of Wales* were on their maiden voyages and the others were almost new.

There were three store ships, the *Golden Grove*, *Borrowdale* and *Fishburn*, loaded down with enough supplies to last a thousand people for more than two years.

To escort them, the British navy sent a big man-of-war, H.M.S. *Sirius*. The *Sirius* was armed with twenty cannons and could defend the fleet if it came under attack from enemy ships or pirates.

The eleventh ship was the tiny naval brig, H.M.S. *Supply*. This little ship was only the size of a small ferry but it was the swiftest sailer in the fleet. It scurried after the other ships like a busy pup, carrying messages, relaying signals and rounding up stragglers when they fell too far behind. No one could have predicted what an important role this little ship was to play.

The voyage to New South Wales was expected to take eight months.

Captain Arthur Phillip, Governor of the new colony, had been told to build the settlement at Botany Bay. When the fleet was almost there, he boarded the *Supply* and sailed ahead to examine the land and find a safe anchorage. The officers were excited to see this new country, and many kept diaries about the voyage. Lieutenant Philip Gidley King wrote in his diary that as the little ship entered Botany Bay, several Aboriginal men were running along the shore brandishing their spears. By the time the rest of the fleet arrived, a great many Aborigines had gathered on both the north and south headlands to watch. At first the Aborigines were very cautious of the white people but several days later they came on to the beach to watch the white men haul in their fishing nets. Dr Bowes Smyth wrote: "They were all provided with lances of great length, pointed with the Bone of a Sting Ray at one end and a piece of Oyster Shell at the other rubbed to a fine edge, and one of them had a heavy bludgeon . . . They were all perfectly naked."

The new arrivals found Botany Bay very disappointing. Where were the green fields Captain Cook had written about in his report? There were no grasslands on which to pitch their tents or run their animals. There was no fertile soil in which to plant their crops. Botany Bay would never support a thousand people because there was hardly any fresh water. The bay was shallow and exposed to the wind and the ships would have to anchor a long way from the shore. This would make them very hard to unload. Governor Phillip had to find somewhere else to settle.

He and his officers went in three longboats rowed by convicts to explore Port Jackson, a little to the north. As they rowed through the heads, a magnificent sight met their eyes. Phillip wrote: "We got into Port Jackson early in the afternoon, and had the satisfaction of finding the finest harbour in the world in which a thousand sail of the line may ride in perfect security."

Phillip found a cove with a fresh stream of water and named the place " Sydney " after his friend Lord Sydney, the British Secretary of State.

Two days later, Phillip brought the *Supply* around to Sydney Cove, ordering the other ships to follow. But as the ships prepared to leave Botany Bay, two French ships appeared off the heads. They were the *Boussole* and the *Astrolabe* , commanded by a French explorer, the comte de La Pérouse.

La Pérouse had been away from France for two and a half years on an exploration voyage around the Pacific. His crew desperately needed fresh provisions such as meat and vegetables. He had heard that the English intended to set up an outpost at Botany Bay and had come expecting to find a town built, and a market established. But the First Fleet, after its long voyage, had no fresh provisions to give him.

After ten weeks the Frenchmen left Botany Bay. And disappeared. It wasn't until forty years later that an adventurer and Pacific island trader, Captain Peter Dillon, discovered that the two French ships had been wrecked on Vanikoro in the Solomon Islands. There were no survivors.

At Sydney Cove the English ships had to wait many months to unload their stores. Weatherproof huts had to be built to store dry-goods such as flour and rice, which could not be exposed to the weather.

One by one, however, the First Fleet ships sailed away, leaving the two naval vessels, the *Sirius* and the *Supply*, to serve and protect the colony.

The tiny *Supply* was starting to wear out. It had been put to sea again in mid-February 1788 to carry a party of officers and convicts to Norfolk Island to start a settlement.

Now it was sailing so low in the water that waves were washing over its decks. It would soon be of very little use.

People began to scan the horizon in the hope of sighting a ship arriving from England . Life in isolated Sydney was very difficult. Clearing the land was slow, back-breaking work. The ground was rocky and covered with huge old trees. Most were so large that grubbing the roots out with feeble hand tools exhausted the convicts. When at last they had cleared enough ground to plant a crop, nothing grew because ants and field mice carried off the seeds.

Further disasters struck the colony when the cattle escaped into the bush, never to be found, and sheep were killed by dingoes. Meat became scarce.

Still no ship came.

Finally, in September 1789 the storeship, the *Guardian* , left London for Sydney - heavily loaded with supplies. On the deck it carried fifty fruit trees, specially cultivated by Sir Joseph Banks to be planted in the colony. Then, when the ship reached the Cape of Good Hope the crew took aboard cattle, sheep and all types of farm animals. They were expecting Sydney Cove to have cleared land, crops growing and fenced paddocks ready to receive the livestock. The truth was that all the crops had failed and the people were so weak with hunger they could barely work.

As misfortune would have it, on 23 December, the *Guardian* struck an iceberg in the Southern Ocean.

The crew put to sea in four lifeboats. Three of those boats were never seen again. The twenty-five convicts who were on board could not fit into the lifeboats, and were left behind. Brave Captain Rioux refused to desert them and stayed on board. Together they worked the pumps and kept the ship afloat until a passing French ship took them in tow. The *Guardian* wallowed into Table Bay, on the Cape of Good Hope, listing and low in the water. The captain and convicts were saved, but the ship was beyond repair. Most of its precious cargo, so badly needed in Sydney, was left on the shore to rot.

Back at Sydney Cove, the situation grew more desperate. And with no modern technology such as radios or telephones, Governor Phillip was not to know the *Guardian* was lost. Food supplies became so low he could wait no longer. He decided to send half of the population to Norfolk Island where farms were producing crops.

They were taken there in the *Sirius* and the *Supply*. The *Sirius* then had orders to hasten to China for supplies.

Nearly three years had passed since the First Fleet left England. The people were dressed in rags. The soldiers mounted guard in bare feet because there were no shoes in the colony and everyone, even the Governor, was put on half rations.

On 5 April 1790, the *Supply* returned to Sydney with the devastating news that the *Sirius* had been wrecked on the reef at Norfolk Island.

That evening, Governor Phillip assembled his officers and told them the colony faced starvation. Every small boat was to be used for public fishing and the best marksmen in the marines would go out every day to shoot kangaroos.

Their only hope for longer term survival lay with the little brig, the *Supply*, now leaky and worn out. *Supply* was to make a run for the closest town, Batavia (now called Jakarta) in Indonesia. The *Supply's* hold could store very little, but its Captain could buy food and commission another ship to bring it back.

Two weeks later, *Supply* set sail. Captain Watkin Tench wrote in his diary: "The *Supply* left for Batavia, carrying with her fervent prayers for her safety, and an anxious population watched her out of sight." The round trip was expected to take six months.

On 13 May at Sydney Cove, Joseph Owens, a convict and the oldest man on the First Fleet, died of hunger. Younger convicts had cheated him out of his rations.

The *Supply* struggled back to Sydney on 18 October, carrying a precious cargo of food. In Batavia, a terrible fever had been raging and several of the *Supply's* officers had died there. Most of the crew were ill when they arrived back in Sydney and the ship was in such a bad state that Governor Phillip dared not send it to sea again. The good news was that a Dutch ship, the *Waaksamheid*, was due in a few weeks, carrying 171 barrels of beef, 172 barrels of pork, seventy thousand pounds (that's almost 32 tonnes) of rice, one thousand pounds (that's 454 kilos) of sugar and 39 barrels of flour - all bought in Batavia.

The voyage had taken the *Supply* six months and two days but the gallant little ship had saved the British population of Sydney from starvation.

All the colony's carpenters were called in to patch up the leaks sufficiently to get the *Supply* back to England.

And then, in 1799, after further repairs in England, the indefatigable *Supply* returned to Australia - bringing the first cargo of merino sheep to the colony!

This was definitely *Supply's* last trip . . . During the voyage, its timbers split open, water poured in below deck and the pumps were used for the whole voyage. It was only through the good seamanship of Captain Kent and the absence of any bad weather during the voyage that the *Supply* did not go down. It limped into Sydney Harbour in great distress. An inspection found that its timbers were rotten and it was finally condemned as unseaworthy.

The *Supply* finished its days on a Sydney Harbour beach while all around it the young colony that it had served so well, grew and flourished. Colonists salvaged and recycled everything they could from it, and in a few years the heroic H.M.S. *Supply* had completely disappeared.