Were the “Water Rats” on Norfolk Island, Australia’s first Surf Life Saving Group?

In 1842 Joshua Hamlet Gregory a newly arrived Soldier on Norfolk Island with the 96th Regiment recorded a boat coming in from a Yankee Whaler with a woman on board. The surf was high and dangerous and they did not attempt turn back until it was too late. He describes standing on the rocks, 6 convicts with their arms folded wearing nothing but their thin drawers, preparing to dive into the water to save any of the boats occupants if the boat overturned in the surf. He described them as the best swimmers he ever saw and that they were sure to get a reduction in sentence if they saved anyone.

These Surf Life Savers were known on the Island, as the “Water Rats”.

At least three convicts received reductions of sentence in this way.

* George Davenport, Charles Sturt’s convict cook who saved the life of Captain Rennoldson of the *Queen Charlotte*. The Captain unfortunately died soon after of gunshot wounds.
* William Archer, a recidivist transported to Norfolk Island for cattle duffing saved a man when a boat from the *Arthur Phillip* was overturned at the bar in 1840. During that incident two men, Best and McLean, drowned but Archer was returned to the mainland and freed, later becoming a cattle baron and third Mayor of Grafton.
* Another famous recipient was James Porter who saved some officers who had been fishing at Cascade.

Transcribed from Page 45 of handwritten account

“One day we were all surprised at seeing a large vessel come booming down on the settlement. She was flying Yankee colours and appeared too large for a whaler, and too slovenly for a man of war, but be what she would , on she came with her wide spreading sails, until within a quarter of a mile of the beach when she hove to and lowered a boat which pulled for the shore.

The bar at the time was rolling mountains high and impossible for any boat to cross it in safety, We signaled to them to keep off, but they paid no attention to us. As she came nearer we saw, sitting in her stern a lady and a gentleman. In vain we tried to make them sensible of their danger, but it was no use.

In a moment the Water Rats were at their post: These water Rats as we called them,-were convicts that stood on the rock ready to plunge into the waves in case a boat upset. If they had the good luck to rescue anyone, they were sure to get a part of their sentence struck off. They were certainly the best swimmers I ever saw in my life. As I said before, there they stood, six in number like statues with their arms folded across their chests, with nothing on but a pair of thin drawers, a smile of satisfaction sat upon the visage of each reckless and daring exile.

On came the gallant little boat, jumping from wave to wavelike a thing of life. When they had got within fifty yards of the bar they could see their danger, but it was too late to retreat, for she was then in the midst of heavy swells and it was as safe to go one way as the other. The crew showed both strength and skill, but it was all to no purpose for the swells were too much for them. Sometimes she was completely covered with the spray and drenched to the skin the people that were in her.

She neared the point and I could see the lady was in great alarm. She looked towards the shore in a most pitiful manner, but when her eyes fell apon the Water Rats, she seemed to eye them with something like satisfaction for she doubtlessly understood their business.”

*From the Norfolk Island Museum Collection.*