



Brothers Nikola (left) and Anastasi Papanastasiou together on Kastellorizo in 1914.

## 'The right man' – Nikolaos Papanastasiou & Nicholas Hammond CBE DSO

By Nicholas Pappas, Sydney

*It is a regular privilege for me to explore Kastellorizo's history through the pages of Filia. For this piece, I turn the lens on my own family and the intriguing story that I came to learn about my paternal grandfather, Nikola. Like Nikola's eventful past, there are many other secrets waiting to be discovered about our ancestors and the lives they experienced in rapidly changing times. I hope this story encourages others to dig deep into their own origins and be enriched by the stories that will be revealed.*

I hardly recall my paternal grandfather after whom I was named. His name was **Nikolaos Yeorgiou Papanastasiou** (born Kastellorizo, 16 November 1882; died Sydney, 26 December 1962), but on Kastellorizo he was known as Nikola 'tou Mourélou', a nickname that had first been given to his elder brother Anastasi in reference to his sturdy, stocky frame<sup>1</sup>.

Like their father before them, Anastasi and Nikola were ship-owning sea captains. Separated in age by almost twenty years, they plied the eastern Mediterranean in the first two decades of the twentieth century, mainly shipping timber and other Anatolian produce to Egypt and Cyprus.

At first, my grandfather, as the junior sibling, worked on his brother's caique, but by 1914 he had acquired his own larger vessel, a 30-tonne two-masted schooner. In 1916, he re-named it *Anna*, after his young wife, Anna Efstathiou Atzemi, whom he

married in November that year.

Maritime trade was difficult in the years of the First World War. Nikola and Anna had their first child in November 1917, a girl named Triantáfylo after Nikola's mother (Triantafyliá Papanastasiou nee Efstathiou), but tragedy befell the couple on 13 February 1919 when Anna was one of the first victims of the Spanish flu pandemic that struck the island that month. Nikola was left alone with a 14-month daughter to care for.

But the extended family rallied and arrangements were swiftly made for Nikola to wed an orphaned girl from a formerly-prosperous branch of the Stamatiou (Stamatoglou) family. She was named Triantafyliá, and like Nikola, her fortunes had been stung, in her case by the premature death of both her parents in their forties. In early 1919, 20-year old Triantafyliá was living a sheltered existence under the stern care of aunts and uncles on the island, her family's fortune diminished by her parents' early passing, the loss of the family's landholdings in Antiflo (today's Kaş) and her only sister's departure for Mersina (Mersin, Turkey). Her match to Nikola solved problems on both sides.

Nikola and Triantafyliá set up their home in a large house near the harbourfront which Triantafyliá had received from her late mother's estate. It came with a shop (now the island's only bank), the rentals from which Triantafyliá shared with her absent



The Anna in dry-dock while she was being fitted with an engine in 1928. Until recently, it was thought that this photo was taken on Kastellorizo, but further investigation has revealed that the location is in fact the Harani shipyard in Symi.

sister. Between 1920 and 1933, Triantafylíá was to bear six children to Nikola, and they enjoyed a traditional domestic existence on Kastellorizo that was to be interrupted by the March 1926 earthquake (which brought down their home – they returned to Anna’s dowried home while it was rebuilt) and declining economic activity on the island, a factor which compelled Nikola to look regularly for new opportunities beyond his customary seabound trading.

But, as the 1930s rolled on, the situation on Kastellorizo was worsening. As Europe slowly headed towards another world war, the lure of emigration to new lands, particularly Australia, became stronger. Triantafylíá’s relatives in Perth and Adelaide encouraged her to make the long journey with her young family, but Nikola resisted, confident that his sturdy caique, with its British flag, would prove to be the family’s salvation. Unlike many of his compatriots who sailed under the Italian flag, Nikola believed, with some justification, that the Union Jack was like an insurance policy that would provide security in the Mediterranean in troubled times.

Events would prove him wrong with the onset of war. Nikola, together with another 50 or so Greek seamen from the Dodecanese, happened to be in Cyprus when Italy declared war

on Britain in June 1940 and, as an Italian subject, he was immediately interned by the British and the Anna seized. The fact that his ship sailed under the Red Ensign mattered little, at least at this stage. Nikola was detained with his crew at the Hotel Berengaria (in the village of Prodomos in the Troodos mountains) which was converted by the British into a makeshift detention centre for ‘enemy aliens’. And there Nikola was to remain until a fateful day in late September 1940 when he was spotted by a young and enterprising officer from the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), **Nicholas Hammond**, who was to enjoy a distinguished wartime career in undercover operations and, later, as a noted scholar in Greek studies.<sup>2</sup>

Hammond was on the lookout for a Greek captain from the Dodecanese who ‘would be prepared to play and could be relied on to keep his mouth shut.’ Hammond later wrote:

*At the internment camp, I found the right man. Nikola Papanastasiou, captain of the Anna, a 30-tonne motorised vessel... He answered for his crew of 3 young men, Alexandros Maniskas, Nikitas Liris and Mihail Zoumbatlis, who are also interned; they left the Dodecanese shortly before the Italians entered the war and were then interned, although the Anna sails under the British flag.*



Nicholas Hammond photographed at the time he recruited Nikola in special operations in the Aegean.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> A *mourélo* was a short piece of hardwood used as additional ballast on sailing vessels.

<sup>2</sup> **Nicholas Hammond** CBE DSO (1907-2001) was a British historian, geographer and classicist. Regarded as one of the leading authors on the history of ancient Macedonia, he was awarded the Greek Order of the Phoenix for his academic achievements.

The first page of Hammond’s letter to Nikola of 21 January 1941.



At this first encounter, it appears that Nikola and Hammond struck up a rapport, even though Nikola's English was limited to a few words. Thankfully, Hammond's Greek was better, largely because of his privileged education in classical Greek at both school and university. What he couldn't convey in words he was able to write down in the steady hand of a Classics scholar, complete with correct accentuation and *ióta subscript*.<sup>3</sup>

But what did Hammond have in store for Nikola? Hammond recalled:

*I had a full discussion with him of the possibilities... he was prepared to cross at night from Greek waters with a fast motor-boat into the vicinity of an Italian naval base; from there his crew could swim (they are excellent swimmers) and fix 'limpets' onto submarines or other craft. His idea was to work from some small islands towards Leros as their chief objective.*

Leros was the obvious target because it had been heavily fortified by the Italians and, with its enormous harbour, served as the centre of their naval operations in the Aegean. But the task before Nikola and his men was a formidable one. 'Limpets' were high explosives that attached, barnacle-like, to the hulls of vessels and were detonated via a timing mechanism. Nikola would be required to enter Italian waters under the pretext of one of his typical trading journeys and then despatch his young crew in the dead of night to swim into highly-protected enclosures and attach explosives to moored enemy craft. A more risky endeavour one could scarcely imagine.

With little thought, Nikola accepted the challenge. He was no doubt encouraged in this by the fee Hammond offered, but his patriotic zeal and his personal desire to be liberated from his incarceration undoubtedly also played their part. The two 'Nikolas' shook hands as Hammond assured Nikola that his deeds for the Dodecanese would long be remembered.

Hammond travelled to Alexandria and made immediate arrangements for Nikola and his crew to be released and for the Anna to be returned to them. After contracts for the mission were signed, Nikola was then directed to sail for Haifa (then Palestine) where Hammond agreed to meet him and instruct him and his crew in the use of limpets and other high

explosives. The training, which took place between 13-20 October, went smoothly and the Anna then sailed to Amorgos (via Crete to avoid enemy craft) and waited there for instructions to undertake its first undercover operation.

It is difficult to comprehend how Nikola must have felt before this, his first, mission. Here he was, a merchant trader unaccustomed to being at the forefront of war, about to risk his life and the lives of his crew by entering dangerous waters to destroy German and Italian craft, all while pretending to engage in innocuous trading and sponge fishing. While the results of the Leros mission are still unknown, in a subsequent letter from January 1941, Hammond wrote (in perfect, if slightly antiquated, Greek) that Nikola had impressed him on his first mission:

*Theodosios tells me that you arrived safely back from Anatolia and that you have brought with you much information about the situation of your 'patridha'. You have done well and I am very delighted that you have returned quickly... I am very satisfied.*

But Hammond had more tasks for Nikola. The next target was Symi:

*I direct you to take two small boats and a large can that holds two diving apparatuses... if you hear that there are [enemy] ships in Symi, you will send a small boat with two crew members... and they will do the job.<sup>4</sup>*

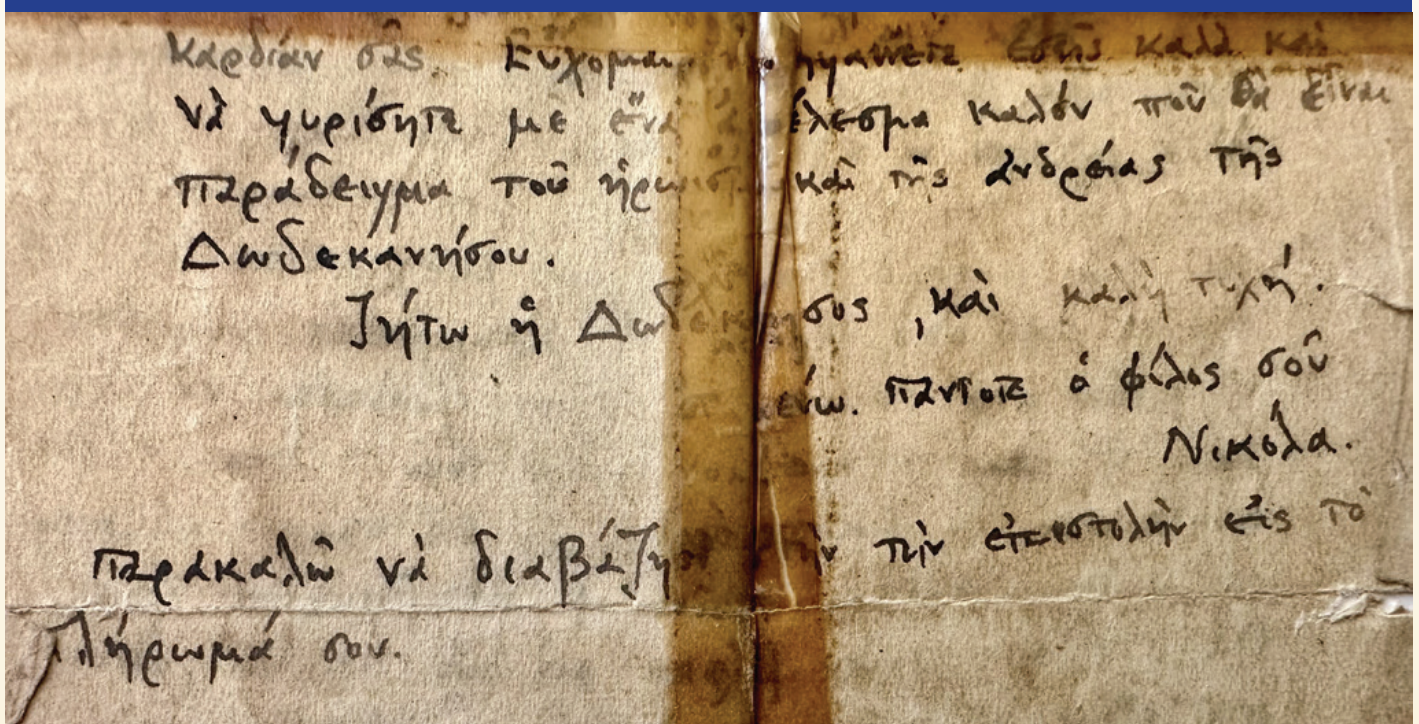
Naturally, confidentiality was key and Hammond did not hesitate to remind Nikola of the need for absolute discretion:

*You must tell them [ie his crew] to keep their mouths shut at all times so that there are no problems for your families in the islands.*

Hammond closed this secret despatch to Nikola with an exhortation that conveys the bond between the two men:

*I remember well that you are all determined and keen to be brave and to help your patridha... I hope that things go well for you and that you return with a good result that will be an example of the heroism and bravery of the Dodecanese. Long live the Dodecanese, and good luck, I remain, always your friend, Nikola*

Hammond's closing exhortation to Nikola from his letter of 21 January 1941.

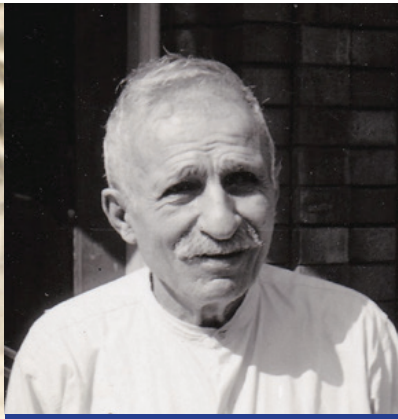




*Nikola photographed in Cyprus in 1941 while working for the Allies.*

It appears that the Symi mission took place in early February 1941 at around the same time as the British were planning their ill-fated commando assault on Kastellorizo known as Operation Abstention. In the same month, we know that Nikola also entered into new contractual arrangements for the hire of the Anna for 'raids on the Dodecanese', but by 19 February an Admiralty report recorded that her whereabouts had become unknown after she had completed her mission and sailed for Haifa.

Henceforth, Nikola's movements become sketchy, as surviving records of his various missions are scarce. By May 1942, Nikola



*An ageing Nikola in Sydney in 1958.*

and his ship are recorded as being under the control of MI9 'for escape purposes', a reference to her assisting Allied servicemen escape from occupied islands as the Allied cause in the Aegean deteriorated.<sup>3</sup> And in March 1943, we find Nikola back in Paphos, Cyprus, receiving payment for his crew from British naval personnel for more undercover operations in the Aegean during the previous two months.

Documents held by the Public Records Office in London confirm that Nikola spent a total of at least three years engaged in such enterprises and his personal records include letters from Hammond (signing off merely as 'Nikola'), various contracts and receipts for the Anna's hire and, his prized possession, an inscribed sterling silver cigarette case given to him by one of the SOE squadrons he assisted.

The extraordinary thing about all of this is that Nikola never spoke about it to his family. His close relationship with Hammond, his devotion to the Allied cause in the Aegean, and the enormous risks he and his dedicated crew took were never once mentioned. Even when close to death, as he pressed a tied-up bundle of these most cherished documents into the hands of his eldest son, nothing was said. The identity of the other 'Nikola' who signed the mysterious letters was to remain a mystery until the matter was investigated in various war archives some 50 years later.

We will probably never know just what impact Nikola and his crew of young men had in the service of the Allies. That they destroyed a number of enemy vessels there can be no doubt. But beyond that, the highly secretive nature of their work in an age when so much was unrecorded in this theatre of war means that the detail of the exploits of these intrepid 'caique raiders', as they came to be known, will remain a mystery.

Nikola and Triantafyliá arrived in Fremantle in 1949. After a brief stay with relatives in Perth, they settled in Sydney. Life's priorities soon took over; daughters had to be married, while sons were expected to prosper. For the ageing Nikola, life in a rented flat in Randwick was a world away from his previous life as a captain plying the eastern Mediterranean. Gradually ravaged by disease, he soon fell into a malaise and lost touch with the new land he hardly ever came to know. The last photos reveal a man weighed down by the burdens of old age. Nikola passed away peacefully on Boxing Day, 1962, aged 80.

Family history can sometimes surprise, even startle, us. For me, it is hard to reconcile the sad and tired face of the ageing man who was my paternal grandfather with his wartime exploits. But I am glad that I delved deeper into his past and uncovered a life of hitherto unknown courage in the face of daunting adversity.

Notes (cont)

<sup>3</sup>The ióta subscript is a diacritic mark in the Greek alphabet signified by a small ióta below a letter. Its use indicates that an ióta previously existed that had been lost over time. It is no longer used in the demotic form of Greek.

<sup>4</sup>'Να κάνουν την δουλειαν' is how Hammond describes the affixing of the explosives to the enemy vessels. Given the sensitivity, he makes no direct reference to limpets or other high explosives in his letters to Nikola.

<sup>5</sup> MI9 was a division of the British Directorate of Military Intelligence set up to assist the return of prisoners of war and others who had evaded capture.

# ASIMINA'S SPIRIT RETURNS

by Vasiliki Nihlas-Bogiatzis OAM, Canberra

Many of us have been fortunate enough to make the 'pilgrimage' to Kastellorizo. Darwin sailors and adventurers, Rodney and son, Jack Haritos, did it with an extraordinary difference.

Rodney's great grandmother, Asimina Harmanis, of the Tourkomanoli clan, travelled from Kastellorizo to Darwin in the early 1900s, with lengthy stops in Port Said and Singapore.

Fast forward to 2023. Rodney, Jack and trusty shipmate Shane Ralph retraced Asimina's journey - in reverse. Honouring Asimina's spirit, they travelled from Darwin to Kastellorizo in Rodney's beloved boat, Rattle N Hum. All 16.5 metres of her!



The newly appointed mayor, Nikos Asvestis and the crew from the Rattle N Hum. Left to Right: Shane Ralph, Rodney Haritos, Nikos Asvestis and Jack Haritos.

What took Asimina over a year with long mandatory stops, took Asimina's boys 165 days, roughly 4 months. The boys anchored in Kastellorizo's harbour in the shadow of the giant incoming ferry to great confusion, horn hooting and laughter from locals cheering on their grand entry. They completed 9000 kilometres by sail and motor.

Their intrepid resilience is unsurprising. Their Tourkomanoli clan comes from a line of swashbucklers, both female and male. Reliably their progenitors came to Kastellorizo from Hydra and Spetses. The Tourkomanoli heritage includes a touch of piracy and contraband and more than likely, some murders and hair raising escapes.

The epithet, Tourkomanoli, is unlikely to have meant a lover of Turks in the era of Ottoman occupation. However, as a clan, we can also claim the excitement of elopement, a love match and purported family links to the world's first female admiral, Bouboulina.

Tourkomanoli aka Emmanuel (Manoli) Margaritis (1801-1904) arrived on Kastellorizo in the mid 1800's having eloped with his bride, the very much younger Eleni Traiforou. This busy entrepôt provided the couple with safe sanctuary. Its deep harbour replete with tall ships and a thriving mercantile trade promised a new start.

Oral history has it that Eleni was the daughter of the Mayor of Hydra and a great granddaughter of national heroine, Bouboulina. Manoli on the other hand, apparently had a price on his head and was the subject of orders to "kill on sight".

The 1800's were torrid and dangerous times, when young men grew up fast. Despite a family legacy of lawyers and magistrates from Hydra dating to the 1700's, it's believed he came of age on Bouboulina's flagship, the famed Agamemnon, engaging actively at

sea during the Greek War of Independence. As a law student, Jack may have inherited both sides of this family's gene pool.

Hydra's records tell us that Tourkomanoli's brother, Yiorgios, was equally adventurous, a legendary Pirpoliti. With a select band of volunteers, he ran interference against the Ottomans by launching floating fire boats to ram, burn and inflict damage to their fleets. The brothers were close and believed to be members of the Kolokotroni Guard, gaoled alongside Kolokotroni at Palamidi fortress, Nafplion.

Highly romantic and colourful adventures if all is to be believed. Yet oral history often speaks some truth.



From left: Nikos Asvestis, Mayor of Kastellorizo and Rodney Haritos

Perhaps life continues to play out intergenerationally in endless forms and iterations with characters reminiscent of our forebears. This passionate love of boats, freedom and the sea, with a dash of romance, and a touch of piratical encounter, fits right into our risk taking genetic profile.

This possible family predisposition hit home for me in Perth, at Dr John Yiannakis' presentation at the National Kastellorizian Council Conference in October 2023. His talk, Migration and Megistopoules, included a very familiar photo. There was my great grandmother's sister Asimina flanked by her two granddaughters.

Asimina (1860-1928) was the first of the Tourkomanoli progeny. Six siblings followed including my great grandmother Marigo. Asimina married Nicholas Harmanis, a talented ship's carpenter from Syros, however, she was widowed in 1909. Her first born Alexandros left for Australia soon after 1910 and the rest of the family followed a few years later, with Asimina paving the way for her sisters.

Dr Yiannakis cited the courageous resilience of those pioneering Kastellorizian women of indomitable spirit. Darwin in the early 1900's would not have been easy, let alone for a widow with seven children.

While I contemplated that photo, a historical first was being enacted in Kastellorizo.

At that very moment I received a message from Jack Haritos. It was proof positive that Asimina's Tourkomanoli psyche, her imagination, strength and courage, had traversed generations. Jack messaged:

"Dear Vasiliki, as you have seen we have arrived safely... on Kastellorizo... Pulling into Kastellorizo was emotional... People have been coming up noticing the Australian flag in awe. It's a very proud

moment.

This is surely the island of dreams and just...as I remember and imagine it... I am hoping to go to the Asimina house ruins and attend a service in the Helen and Constantine church..."

But there was more. It is inconceivable that the continuing history of this family should not include at least an encounter or two with danger, possibly even piracy. Just look at the region through which they travelled. Jack when pressed, continued.

"The journey stopped in Cocos (Keeling) Islands then followed the trade winds to Seychelles where after a 4 week hiatus they (Rodney and Shane) sailed onto Djibouti via anchoring near Socotra Island Yemen (dad says the most amazing and crazy anchorage ever). I joined them in Djibouti, and we motored as there was very little



Rodney Haritos was invited to sit in the mayoral chair.

wind to Suakin in Sudan where we refuelled before forging ahead to Soma Bay Egypt ...an amazing Red Sea diving resort. We then took to the Suez Canal. My great grandfather, Efstratios Haritos, worked on its expansion on his way to Australia...[it is possible] that Port Said was where he met or it was arranged that he marry Eleni Harmanis. So the place was very special.

We then reached the Mediterranean. Pulling into Kastellorizo was emotional... My most memorable experience was seeing the town emerge as we entered the harbour. Truly moving."

Aah yes, almost forgot. Jack's afterthought.

"... we did have a pirate incident just after we left Djibouti.

Some men came up to us in a speedboat just after sunset insisting

they were the coast guard. However, we saw through them, and told them to go away (firmly). Eventually they left. All of us were unharmed...the international anti-piracy coalition moving secretly in the shadows at night made us feel much safer."

Postscript

The last word belongs to Jack. After the excitement of a mayoral reception, his last day was poignant. Awaiting the Rhodes ferry he wrote:

"I just saw the movie at the mosque, I had tears."

You're in good company dear Jack, it gets to us all. Know that Asimina's boys have done her and all of us, proud. The spirit of Tourkomanoli and Asimina have been reawakened.



The crew of the Rattle N Hum  
From left: Jack Haritos, with his father, Rodney Haritos and Shane Ralph, crew.

With thanks to Jack Haritos for permission to reprint extracts from his text messages. Photos courtesy of Chrissie Verevis.



To become a member, to advertise or for general information contact Marilyn Tsolakis, [coordinator@kastellorizo.com](mailto:coordinator@kastellorizo.com) PO Box 2118 Churchlands, Western Australia 6018.

[www.kastellorizo.com](http://www.kastellorizo.com)