

The First Naval Confrontations in Australian Waters – in 1629?

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The first confrontations involving waterborne forces in Australian waters took place in 1629, in rather unusual circumstances. The nature of the allegiances of the prospective combatants is also unique in terms of Australian naval history. Yet few, even among maritime and naval historians, would be aware of the specific events and how they came about. Nevertheless it was an important link in a chain of events that had much wider implications for Australian history.

The Early History of Australian Naval Engagements, Operations and Confrontations

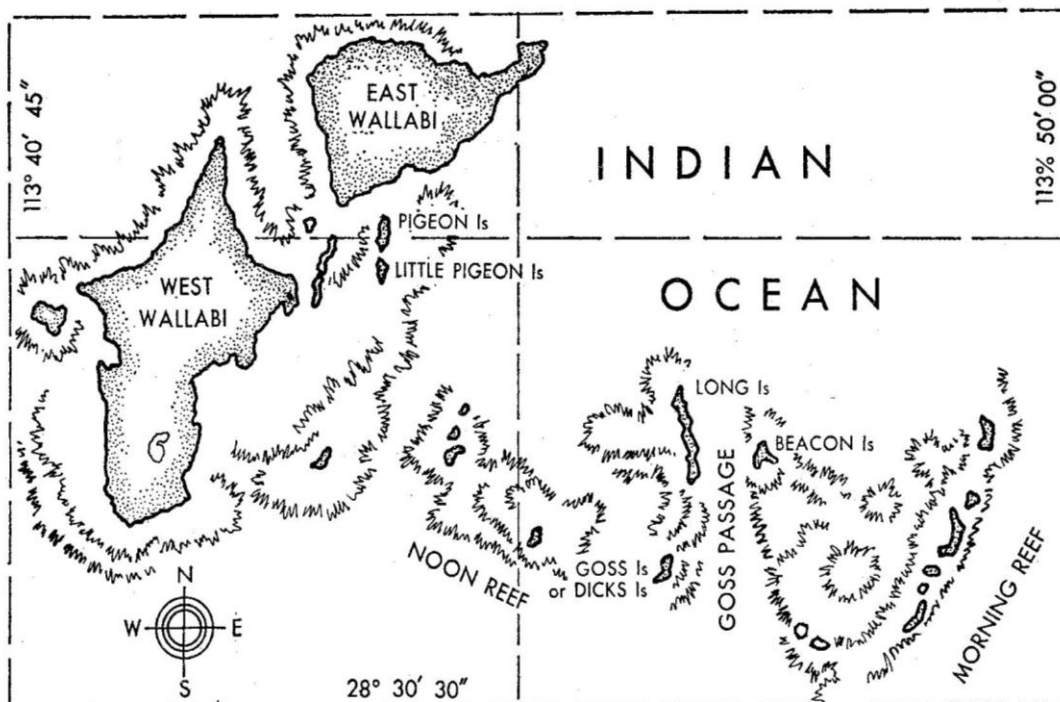
With the advent of Federation on 1 January 1901 Australian naval defence became the responsibility of the Commonwealth Naval Force, formed from the states' meagre naval forces, and the Royal Navy. Then on 10 July 1911 King George V signed a proclamation for the formal establishment of the Royal Australian Navy.¹ The RAN's first engagement took place a matter of minutes after the declaration of war against Germany on 5 August 1914. In this instance RAN reservists fired from Fort Nepean to successfully prevent the escape from Port Phillip Bay of the German steamer *Pfalz*. Other seizures of enemy ships in Australian and New Guinean waters quickly followed. During that first week of the war the RAN also launched its first major seaborne operation, leading to the HMAS *Sydney* and three destroyers entering Simpsonhafen harbour at Rabaul in New Britain, at that time part of German New Guinea, on 11 August 1914, hoping to surprise the cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. The harbour was, however, empty.² But these actions were not the first naval engagements in our history.

Following the colonisation of New South Wales in 1788, the Royal Navy carried primary responsibility for the naval defence of British territory in Australia, eventually supplemented from 1855 by small naval forces acquired by four of our colonies. The earliest naval actions in this period did not involve Royal Navy vessels, however, but privateers. During the French Revolutionary Wars, Spain formed an alliance with France, formalised by the signing of the Second Treaty of San Ildefonso on 19 August 1796. Under the terms of that treaty Spain and France agreed to combine their forces against the British. An attempt by the Spanish fleet to join up with the French fleet resulted in the Spanish being defeated on 14 February 1797 at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent.³ With open enmity between Britain and Spain privateering commenced, and in 1799 the whalers *Cornwall* and *Kingston* took the opportunity to capture a Spanish vessel, *Nostra Señora de Bethlehem*, off the coast of Peru, and bring her to Port Jackson as a prize. Similarly *El Plumier* was taken by licensed privateers and brought to Port Jackson in November of that year, followed in February 1800 by a Spanish brig captured off the coast of Chile.⁴

To arrive at the earliest example of some form of naval action in Australian history, however, one needs to go back further, to a period in 1629 in which a number of incidents took place that could loosely be considered naval engagements or confrontations. Waterborne forces were involved and the events took place in what are now Australian territorial waters. A complex and horrific series of events set the scene for the actions in question, and played a part in their resolution.

The Batavia Mutiny

At about 0500 hours on 4 June 1629 the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company or VOC) ship, the *Batavia*, on its way to Java with 316 people on board, struck Morning Reef in the Wallabi Group of the Abrolhos Islands, about 60 kilometres off the central west coast of Western Australia.⁵ Approximately 275 people survived the initial disaster, most finding their way by various means to the nearest island, Beacon Island. But they were still in great peril as they had almost no food or water. The most senior officer, Commandeur Francisco Pelsaert,⁶ immediately began to search for water on nearby islands in the ship's yawl, without success. He then decided to make for the mainland in the yawl, accompanied by 50 of the crew. On 9 June, as they approached the coast to land, they were struck by a severe winter storm, and were nearly swamped. They hovered off the coast for almost two days, battling to stay afloat in the stormy seas, before heading north in the hope of finding calmer conditions and water, but were unable to land for a further 550 kilometres. When they did, they found little water and so the decision was made to make for Java, over 2000 kilometres away, to get help. They reached the Sunda Strait on 7 July and were picked up by a passing ship, the *Sardam*. The alarm was raised in the Dutch port of Batavia (modern day Djakarta) and the *Sardam* was quickly readied to return, with Pelsaert in command, to effect a rescue. The *Sardam* departed on 15 July and by the last week in August had returned to the Abrolhos Islands but, because of inaccuracies in determining latitudes, then spent over three weeks trying to locate the wreck and those who had been left behind. Finally, on 17 September they re-located the passengers and crew, only to be confronted by the horror of the infamous Batavia Mutiny. In their absence the mutineers (referred to henceforth as the 'Mutineers') had callously murdered about 125 men, women and children, in many cases with horrific savagery and cruelty.



Wallabi Group – Abrolhos Islands – R. Gerritsen

The Mutiny had been fomenting even before the *Batavia* was wrecked, the ringleaders being the Skipper Ariaen Jacobszoon and the Undermerchant Jeronimus Corneliszoon.⁷ It was Jacobszoon's negligence that had allowed the *Batavia* to be wrecked,⁸ and as he went with Pelsaert in the yawl back to Java, Corneliszoon became the highest ranking officer remaining at the wreck site. Corneliszoon in fact was one of the last to leave the wreck, after about ten days, drifting ashore on the bowsprit.⁹ Once ashore, Corneliszoon assumed command of an elected Council of the survivors.¹⁰ But almost immediately he began to lay the groundwork for the Mutiny.

One of Corneliszoon's first actions, on 19 June, was to send a complement of unarmed soldiers and others who volunteered to accompany them, to West Wallabi Island, or the High Island as they called it, to search for water. He seems to have suspected some of the soldiers might oppose his plans, so arranged for them to be left there in the expectation they would die of thirst.¹¹ He then gathered around him his co-conspirators. By about 3 July they were secretly murdering people.¹² On 5 July Corneliszoon, on a pretext, dismissed the Council and appointed his own, made up of his cronies. Shortly after (9 July), the soldiers and others on the High Island lit fire beacons to signal that they had found water in a couple of natural wells.¹³ They were puzzled by the fact no-one responded.¹⁴ The same day 12 people who had been sent to Traitors Island were massacred.¹⁵ On 14 July for the first time someone was murdered in broad daylight by the mutineers. The following day, 18 of the people who had been sent to Long Island were massacred, but others managed to escape on a home-made raft and make their way to the High Island.¹⁶ Here they and other stragglers alerted the soldiers and their companions there as to what horrors were unfolding.

Having disposed of most of the unwanted crew and passengers, the Mutineers now numbered around 45 individuals, made up of some VOC officials, ten soldiers, six Cadets, two gunners, various crew members and a number of hostages, such as the Predikant (minister) Gijsbert Bastiaenszoon, his sole surviving daughter, and a few women kept as concubines.¹⁷ The people on the High Island, West Wallabi Island, who became known as the Defenders, numbered 47, about half of whom were soldiers and Cadets.¹⁸ The Mutineers' plan now was to seize any rescue vessel and become pirates. However they were concerned that the people on the High Island would warn any would-be rescuers, and so decided that they too had to be eliminated.¹⁹ And so the stage was set for an armed conflict.

The Conflicts and Confrontations in the Course of the *Batavia* Mutiny

The status of the combatants on both sides of the conflicts and confrontations that occurred during the *Batavia* Mutiny was rather unusual in modern terms. All were technically employees of the VOC. The VOC was the world's third joint stock company and arguably the world's first multinational company. But, by virtue of its Charter, granted by States General of the United Netherlands on 20 March 1602, it was a state within state in its area of operations, from the Cape of Good Hope to the Straits of Magellan.²⁰ Military personnel employed by the company might now be considered mercenaries, especially as a proportion were not of Dutch origin. There were, for example eight French soldiers and one English soldier aboard the *Batavia*.²¹ In modern parlance the soldiers on both sides of the conflict would be considered marines, while the Cadets were junior naval or infantry officers with a rank equivalent to an Ensign.

On the surface the odds appeared to be in favour of the Mutineers. The Defenders were unarmed, having been relieved of ‘all weapons’ before being sent to the High Island.²² For their part, the Mutineers had swords, muskets and pikes.²³ But the Defenders had three things in their favour - plenty of water, a reliable food supply in the form of birds, eggs, fish and the tamar wallabies found on West Wallabi Island,²⁴ and an able leader in soldier Wiebbe Hayes. To defend themselves, they made their own weapons. According to an anonymous Defender,²⁵

we set about resistance, making Pikes from Prussian [pine] planks, which we split, and stuck in them spikes fourteen or sixteen inches big, which came drifting from the wreck.²⁶

Anticipating an attack by the Mutineers, the Defenders built a small fortification, known as the ‘Fort’, at Slaughter Point on the edge of their island, overlooking the shallows the Mutineers would have to cross to reach them. This structure still exists, the oldest European built structure in Australia.²⁷



The 'Fort' on West Wallabi Island – R. Gerritsen

There were four engagements between the Mutineers and the Defenders between 27 July and 17 September. But initially Corneliszoon, who came to style himself as ‘Captain General’,²⁸ tried to drive a wedge between the six remaining French soldiers who were part of the Defenders complement, and the other Defenders.²⁹ On 23 July he sent Cadet Daniel Corneliszoon to the High Island with a letter written in French for them, but the Defenders

were alert to Cornesliszoon's treachery and simply took the Cadet prisoner.³⁰ Having failed to overcome the Defenders by subterfuge, Corneliszoon then ordered an attack four days later.

Little is known of the first encounter other than the Mutineers sent 22 combatants in boats to attack the Defenders but they were repulsed.³¹ However, the reason for the Defenders' success may have been the tactics they employed, as revealed in a comment on the second attack on 5 August. This time the Mutineers came with 37 men in three yawls, and again were repulsed. As Corneliszoon later recounted, 'they went straight at them but the others [Defenders] guarded the beach and stood up to their knees in water.'³² It seems that by confronting their attackers in the shallows the Defenders had a sure footing, while keeping the Mutineers unsteady in their yawls.

Next the Mutineers tried to ambush the Defenders. On 1 September, on a pretext of negotiating with them, the Mutineers drew some of the Defenders out into the open. Two of the Mutineers in a yawl nearby then tried to shoot them with their muskets.³³ However, they misfired, their powder was not dry. 'Had we shot immediately with the musket then we should certainly have got them, but the gunpowder burned away 3 or 4 times from the pan,' soldier Jan Hendricxszoon was later heard to say.³⁴

The following day signalled another change of tactics, with the Mutineers resorting to bribery. Corneliszoon arrived on West Wallabi with five of his most trusted henchmen while a number of the other Mutineers waited on a nearby islet, Tattler Island. While pretending to negotiate, they surreptitiously offered wine, fine woollen cloth, jewels and 6,000 guilders³⁵ each to some of the soldiers.³⁶ But the Defenders were not deceived, and sprang their own trap. They seized all six Mutineers and began to tie them up. But one soldier, Wouter Loos, managed to break free and make his escape. As the anonymous Defender described it, 'by a ruse we took five of the principal murderers prisoner. Seeing this, the others resorted to their weapons. When we saw this, that our enemies wanted to come upon us, we struck four of them dead.'³⁷ This was done to 'avoid being hampered by the prisoners.'³⁸ Consequently Lance-Corporal Cornelis Pieterszoon, Cadets Conraat van Huysens and Gysbrecht van Welderen, and Assistant Davidt Zevanck were killed on the spot.³⁹ With their leader Corneliszoon captured and four of their number killed, the Mutineers retired in confusion.

The Mutineers now regrouped and elected the 24 year-old Wouter Loos as their 'Captain'.⁴⁰ Being a soldier, Loos was far more adept in his tactics. On the morning of 17 September the Mutineers attacked again, this time using their muskets to telling effect. Four Defenders were wounded, one, Gunner Jan Dircxszoon from Emden, later dying of his wounds.⁴¹ But as the two hour battle reached its climax, the *Sardam* miraculously appeared.⁴² Hayes immediately jumped in a small boat they had captured from the Mutineers and raced to warn Pelsaert of the terrible events that had unfolded in his absence.⁴³ Shortly after, a yawl carrying 11 armed Mutineers approached the *Sardam*, and a seaborne confrontation loomed. Forewarned, Pelsaert 'mustered his People, the guns being loaded with Musket balls,'⁴⁴ and demanded, 'Wherefore you come aboard armed?'⁴⁵ A standoff then ensued. Pelsaert finally 'ordered them to throw their guns in the sea before they came over which at last they did.'⁴⁶ They were then taken prisoner, and Mutiny was effectively over.



Location of Confrontation Between Mutineers in Yawl and Sardam – R. Gerritsen
(Note upright slabs in the foreground, this was one of the fire beacons used on 9 July 1629)

The following day Pelsaert and the Skipper of the *Sardam* recruited and armed ten soldiers from the High Island, landed on Beacon Island and rounded up the rest of the Mutineers.⁴⁷ Australia's first sea-borne confrontations had now come to an end

The Aftermath of the Batavia Mutiny

Over the next two weeks the leaders of Mutiny were interrogated and tried. On 2 October, Corneliszoon and six others, after having hands chopped off, were hanged.⁴⁸ Wiebbe Hayes, because he had 'faithfully protected and defended' his troop was immediately promoted to Sergeant, with a substantial pay rise, and two of the Cadets, Otto Smit and Allert Janszoon, were made Corporals.⁴⁹ Upon returning to Batavia, Hayes was promoted again, to Vaendrager, the lowest rank of commissioned officer, and given a further pay rise.⁵⁰ Wouter Loos managed to conceal the extent of his crimes until the executions were over. Instead, he and an 18 year-old cabin boy Jan Pelgrom de Bye were sentenced to be marooned on the Australian mainland.⁵¹ Thus, on 16 November 1629, as the *Sardam* headed back for Java, Loos and de Bye, 'provided with everything'⁵² and instructed to 'make themselves known to the folk of this land,'⁵³ were abandoned on the Western Australian coast, probably at the mouth of the Hutt River,⁵⁴ becoming Australia's first European residents.

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¹ Stevens, 2001a, 6-22.

² Stevens 2001b,32,34.

³ Southey 1922,97-105.

In all seven engagements between 1337 and 1833 are titled the Battle of Cape St. Vincent. The one referred to here is known as the Battle of Cape St. Vincent (1797).

⁴ Burroughs 2010,75.

⁵ Henderson 1980, 17.

There are numerous accounts of the Batavia Mutiny, the most recent being Mike Dash's, *Batavia's Graveyard* and Peter FitzSimons' *Batavia*.

⁶ The rank of Commandeur applied because Pelsaert was in command of a fleet of three ships (which had become separated). Skipper Ariaen Jacobsz was technically in command of the *Batavia*.

⁷ Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Pelsaert 1629,162-4,170; Summary of Evidence, Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Pelsaert,172; Examination of Jan Hendricxsz, in Pelsaert, 181-2; Declaration in Short, in Pelsaert, 248-51.

The Undermerchant was in charge of cargo and trade. Cornelisz was also the apothecary on board. His name appears Pelsaert's Journals as "Cornelisz" or "Cornelisz.", but his name should properly be written as "Corneliszoen". It was common practice to abbreviate patronymical names in Dutch records of the period.

⁸ Pelsaert,123; 'Letter from A. van Diemen to Pieter de Carpentier, 30 November - 10 December 1629', in Drake-Brockman 1982,43.

⁹ Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Pelsaert,158.

¹⁰ Pelsaert, 251.

¹¹ Pelsaert,252; Anonymous a,8-9; Anonymous b,10.

¹² Summary of Crimes of Jeronimus Cornelisz., in Pelsaert,173; Pelsaert,251-2.

¹³ These were made up of slabs of limestone and can still be found on West Wallabi Is.

¹⁴ Pelsaert,252.

¹⁵ Summary of Crimes of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Pelsaert,173.

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- ¹⁶ Summary of Crimes of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Pelsaert,173; Pelsaert,252; Anon. a.,8-9; ‘The Letter of Gijsbert Bastiaenz., Predikant’, [no date], in Drake-Brockman, 265.
- ¹⁷ Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz; Copy of Oath, 16 July; Copy of Oath, 20 August, in Pelsaert,163-7.
- ¹⁸ Resolution of the Ship’s Council [*Sardam*], 28 September 1629, in Pelsaert,152.
- ¹⁹ Pelsaert,143-4.
- ²⁰ Reynders and Gerritsen 2009.
- ²¹ The English soldier, Jan (John) Pinten, became ill and had his throat cut by the Mutineers.
- ²² Journals, p.252.
- ²³ Anon. a., p.9.
- ²⁴ Anon. a,9; Letter of Gijsbert Bastiaenz., 267.
- ²⁵ It is not possible to specifically identify this individual, who appears to have been a VOC official who had escaped the massacre on Long Island.
- ²⁶ Anon. a.,9. According to Bastiaenz. in his Letter (267) they also made guns but this seems very unlikely, they may have been captured weapons.
- ²⁷ Bevacqua, 1974.
- ²⁸ Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz.,166.
- ²⁹ The other two French soldiers appear to have been murdered by the Mutineers.
- ³⁰ Letter by Jeronimus Cornelisz, 23 July 1629, in Pelsaert 148-9; Summary of Evidence and Sentence of Daniel Cornelissen, in Pelsaert,240.
- ³¹ Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz.,159-60.
- ³² Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz.,159-60.
- ³³ Pelsaert,142,160; Letter of Gijsbert Bastiaenz.,266.
- ³⁴ Pelsaert,160. Presumably a matchlock musket was being used.
- ³⁵ Equivalent to about 50 years pay for an ordinary soldier.
- ³⁶ Pelsaert,142,253; Letter of Gijsbert Bastiaenz.,267.
- ³⁷ Anon a.,9.
- ³⁸ Pelsaert,253.
- ³⁹ Pelsaert,159.
- ⁴⁰ Examination of Wouter Loos, 24 September 1629, in Pelsaert,224.
- ⁴¹ Summary of Crimes of Wouter Loos, in Pelsaert,227.
- ⁴² Pelsaert,227,253.
- ⁴³ Pelsaert,142.
- ⁴⁴ Anon. a.,9.
- ⁴⁵ Pelsaert,143.
- ⁴⁶ Pelsaert,143.
- ⁴⁷ Pelsaert,144-5.
- ⁴⁸ Pelsaert,213. The condemned included 3 soldiers, a Cadet and a gunner.
- ⁴⁹ Resolution of Ship’s Council, 28 September 1629, in Pelsaert,157.
- ⁵⁰ Final Sentence of Men Already Examined ... 28 January 1630, in Pelsaert,271.
- ⁵¹ Resolution of Ship’s Council, 13 November 1629, in Pelsaert,221-2.
- ⁵² Journals, p.237.
- ⁵³ Instructions for Wouter Loos and Jan Pelgrom de By van Bemel, in Pelsaert,230.
- ⁵⁴ Gerritsen, 2007; 2009.