

## The Batavia Mutiny: Australia's First Military Conflict in 1629

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Most Australians presume that the first military conflict in Australian history, one involving regular soldiers on both sides, occurred sometime after 1788. But that is not so. In fact the first military conflict on Australian soil actually occurred in 1629. It arose in rather unusual circumstances and was itself a most curious little 'war'.

At about 5 a.m. on 4 June 1629 the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (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 km off the central west coast of Western Australia.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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 2 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 had callously murdered about 125 men, women and children, in many cases with horrific savagery and cruelty.

The Mutiny had been fomenting even before the *Batavia* was wrecked, the ringleaders being the Skipper Ariaen Jacobsz and the Undermerchant Jeronimus Cornelisz.<sup>3</sup> It

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<sup>1</sup> Graeme Henderson, *Unfinished Voyages, Western Australian Shipwrecks, 1622-1850*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1963, p.17. There are numerous accounts of the Batavia Mutiny, see for example Henrietta Drake-Brockman, *Voyage to Disaster*, Angus & Robertson, London, 1982 and Mike Dash, *Batavia's Graveyard*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> 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*.

<sup>3</sup> Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Drake-Brockman, pp.162-4,170; Summary of Evidence, Jeronimus Cornelisz, in *ibid*, p.172; Examination of Jan Hendricxsz, in *ibid*, pp.181-2; Declaration in Short, Journals of Francisco Pelsaert, in *ibid*, pp.248-51 [Referred to henceforth as "Journals"]; *et seq.* The Undermerchant was in charge of cargo and trade. Cornelisz was also the apothecary on board. His name appears Pelsaert's Journals as "Cornelisz", but his name should properly be written as "Corneliszon". It was common practice to abbreviate patronymical names in Dutch records of the period.

was Jacobsz's negligence that had allowed the *Batavia* to be wrecked,<sup>4</sup> and as he went with Pelsaert in the yawl back to Java, Cornelisz became the highest ranking officer remaining at the wreck site. Cornelisz in fact was one of the last to leave the wreck, after about 10 days, drifting ashore on the bowsprit.<sup>5</sup> Once ashore, Cornelisz assumed command of an elected Council of the survivors.<sup>6</sup> But almost immediately he began to lay the groundwork for the Mutiny.

One of Cornelisz'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.<sup>7</sup> He then gathered around him his co-conspirators. By about 3 July they were secretly murdering people.<sup>8</sup> On 5 July Cornelisz, 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.<sup>9</sup> They were puzzled by the fact no-one responded.<sup>10</sup> The same day 12 people who had been sent to Traitors Island were massacred.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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, 10 soldiers, 6 cadets, 2 gunners, various crew members and a number of hostages, such as the Predikant (minister) Gijsbert Bastiaensz, his sole surviving daughter, and a few women kept as concubines.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 they too had to be eliminated.<sup>15</sup> And so the conflict began.

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<sup>4</sup> Journals, p.123; Letter from A. van Diemen to Pieter de Carpentier, 30 November - 10 December 1629, in Drake-Brockman, p.43.

<sup>5</sup> Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in *ibid*, p.158.

<sup>6</sup> Journals, p. 251.

<sup>7</sup> Journals, p.252; Anonymous a. Letter written at sea from Batavia, the 11<sup>th</sup> Decemb. 1629 in Leyden Ferry-Boat Gossip (trans. R. Stow), in *Westerly* April, 1972, pp.8-9; Anonymous b. Second Letter, in *ibid*, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> Summary of Crimes of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Drake-Brockman, p.173; Journals, pp.251-2

<sup>9</sup> These were made up of slabs of limestone and can still be found on West Wallabi Is.

<sup>10</sup> Journals, p.252.

<sup>11</sup> Summary of Crimes of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Drake-Brockman, p.173

<sup>12</sup> Summary of Crimes of Jeronimus Cornleisz, p.173; Journals, p.252; Anon. a., pp.8-9; The Letter of Gijsbert Bastiaensz, Predikant, no date, in Drake-Brockman, p.265.

<sup>13</sup> Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz; Copy of Oath, 16 July; Copy of Oath, 20 August, in *ibid*, pp.163-7.

<sup>14</sup> Resolution of the Ship's Council [*Sardam*], 28 September 1629, in *ibid*, p.152.

<sup>15</sup> Journals, pp.143-4.

There were four engagements between the Mutineers and the Defenders between 27 July and 17 September. But initially Cornelisz, who came to style himself as “Captain General”,<sup>16</sup> tried to drive a wedge between the six French soldiers who were part of the Defenders complement, and the other Defenders.<sup>17</sup> On 23 July he sent Cadet Daniel Cornelisz to the High Island with a letter written in French for them, but the Defenders were alert to Cornelisz’s treachery and simply took the cadet prisoner.<sup>18</sup> Having failed to overcome the Defenders by subterfuge, Cornelisz then ordered an attack four days later.

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.<sup>19</sup> For their part, the Mutineers had swords, muskets and pikes.<sup>20</sup> 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,<sup>21</sup> and an able leader in soldier Wiebbe Hayes. And to defend themselves, they made their own weapons. According to an anonymous Defender,<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

Anticipating the 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.<sup>24</sup> Little is known of the first encounter other than the Mutineers sent 22 combatants to attack the Defenders but they were repulsed.<sup>25</sup> 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 Cornelisz later recounted, “they went straight at them but the others [Defenders] guarded the beach and stood up to their knees in water.”<sup>26</sup> It seems that by confronting their attackers by standing in the shallows the Defenders had a sure footing, while keeping the Mutineers unsteady in their yawls.

<sup>16</sup> Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Drake-Brockman, p.166.

<sup>17</sup> There was also an English soldier, John Pinten, in the complement aboard the *Batavia*, but he became ill and had his throat cut by the Mutineers.

<sup>18</sup> Letter by Jeronimus Cornelisz, 23 July 1629, in Drake-Brockman, p.148-9; Summary of Evidence and Sentence of Daniel Cornelissen, in *ibid*, p.240.

<sup>19</sup> Journals, p.252.

<sup>20</sup> Anon. a., p.9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*; Letter of Gijsbert Bastiaensz, in Drake-Brockman, p. 267.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> Anon. a., p.9. According to Bastiaensz in his Letter (p..267) they also made guns but this seems very unlikely, they may have been captured weapons.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Bevacqua, *Archaeological Survey of Sites Relating to the Batavia Shipwreck*, WA Museum, Perth, Report No. 81, 1974, pp.9-13.

<sup>25</sup> Examination of Jeronimus Cornelisz, in Drake-Brockman, p.159-60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.159.

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.<sup>27</sup> 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 Hendricxsz was later heard to say.<sup>28</sup>

The following day signalled another change of tactics, with the Mutineers resorting to bribery. Cornelisz 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 guilders<sup>29</sup> each to some of the soldiers.<sup>30</sup> But the Defenders were not deceived, and sprang their own trap. They seized all six Mutineers and began to tie them up. But 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.”<sup>31</sup> This was done to “avoid being hampered by the prisoners.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently Lance-Corporal Cornelis Pietersz, Cadets Conraat van Huysens and Gysbrecht van Welderen, and Assistant Davidt Zevanck were killed on the spot.<sup>33</sup> With their leader Cornelisz captured and four of their number killed, the Mutineers retired in confusion.

The Mutineers now regrouped and elected 24 year-old Wouter Loos as their “Captain”.<sup>34</sup> 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 Dircxsz from Emden, later dying of his wounds.<sup>35</sup> But as the two hour battle reached its climax, the *Sardam* miraculously appeared.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> Shortly after a yawl carrying 11 armed Mutineers approached the *Sardam*. Forewarned, Pelsaert “mustered his People, the guns being loaded with Musket balls,”<sup>38</sup> and demanded, “Wherefore you come aboard?”<sup>39</sup> He then “ordered them to throw their guns in the sea before they came over which at last they did.”<sup>40</sup> They were then taken prisoner and the Mutiny was over.

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<sup>27</sup> Journals, p.142,160; Letter of Gijsbert Bastiaensz, in Drake-Brockman, p. 266.

<sup>28</sup> Journals, p.160. Presumably a matchlock musket was being used.

<sup>29</sup> Equivalent to about 50 years pay for an ordinary soldier

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp.142,253; Letter of Gijsbert Bastiaensz, p.267.

<sup>31</sup> Anon a., p.9.

<sup>32</sup> Journals, p.253.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.159.

<sup>34</sup> Examination of Wouter Loos, 24 September 1629, in Drake-Brockman, p.224.

<sup>35</sup> Summary of Crimes of Wouter Loos, in *ibid*, p.227.

<sup>36</sup> Journals, p.227,253.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p.142.

<sup>38</sup> Anon. a., p.9.

<sup>39</sup> Journals, p.143.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*

The following day Pelsaert and the skipper of the *Sardam* recruited and armed 10 soldiers from the High Island and rounded up the rest of the Mutineers on Beacon Island.<sup>41</sup> Over the next two weeks the leaders of Mutiny were interrogated and tried. On 2 October, Cornelisz and six others, after having hands chopped off, were hanged.<sup>42</sup> 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 Jansz, were made corporals.<sup>43</sup> Upon returning to Batavia, Hayes was promoted again, with a further pay rise, to Vaendrager, the lowest rank of commissioned officer.<sup>44</sup> Wouter Loos managed to conceal the extent of his crimes until the executions were over. Instead, he and 18 year-old cabin boy Jan Pelgrom de Bye were sentenced to be marooned on the Australian mainland.<sup>45</sup> And so on 16 November 1629, as the *Sardam* headed back for Java, Loos and de Bye, “provided with everything”<sup>46</sup> and instructed to “make themselves known to the folk of this land,”<sup>47</sup> were abandoned on the WA coast, probably at the mouth of the Hutt River,<sup>48</sup> becoming Australia’s first European residents.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, pp.144-5.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p.213. The condemned included 3 soldiers, a cadet and a gunner.

<sup>43</sup> Resolution of Ship’s Council, 28 September 1629, in Drake-Brockman, p.157.

<sup>44</sup> Final Sentence of Men Already Examined ... 28 January 1630, in *ibid*, p.271.

<sup>45</sup> Resolution of Ship’s Council, 13 November 1629, in *ibid*, p.221-2.

<sup>46</sup> Journals, p.237.

<sup>47</sup> Instructions for Wouter Loos and Jan Pelgrom de By van Bemel, in Drake-Brockman, p.230.

<sup>48</sup> Gerritsen, Rupert 2007 ‘The debate over where Australia’s first European residents were marooned in 1629 – Part 1’, *Hydrographic Journal*, vol. 126, pp.20-25; 2009 ‘The debate over where Australia’s first European residents were marooned in 1629 – Part 2’, *Hydrographic Journal*, vols. 128-129, pp.35-41.