

BATAVIA'S HISTORY

Voyage

The VOC's flagship *Batavia* (VOC Chamber Amsterdam) left Texel, Holland on her maiden voyage to the East Indies. She sailed under the command of Francisco Pelsaert - one of the VOC's most experienced merchants - in a fleet of seven ships. The main cargo consisted of silver coins and two antiquities belonging to the artist Rubens for sale to an Indian Mogul ruler, but it also carried pre-fabricated sandstone blocks for a portico to be erected as gatehouse in the city of Batavia. This was the new headquarters of the VOC in the East Indies situated in the north-western tip of Java.

Officially, there were 341 people on board, but a few last-minute desertions were noted, as was relatively common at the time. Of those who actually embarked, slightly more than two-thirds were the officers and men sailing the vessel. The remaining number was made up of about a hundred soldiers and, by far the smallest group, civilian passengers who were going, or returning to the Indies. Some of these passengers were women and children, either wives of Company employees or servants.

The journey had an inauspicious start with a violent storm on the North Sea separating most of the ships in the convoy. When calmer weather returned only three of the seven ships had sight of each other; *Batavia*, *Assendelft* and the *Buren*.

Their voyage progressed well and they reached the Cape of Good Hope a month ahead of schedule. While there, it became clear that there was not much love lost between Pelsaert and the ship's captain Adrian Jacobsz, whose drunken behaviour extracted a very public scolding from Pelsaert. This was to sow the seeds of disaster.

From Cape Town, the three ships were to "progress eastwards between 36° south and 39° south to 3,500 miles, then steer north-east until 30° latitude south, and

you sight Eendracht's land before sailing on to Java". However, shortly after leaving Cape Town the ships lost sight of each other and the *Batavia* was alone.

During the Indian Ocean crossing Pelsaert fell seriously ill and remained mostly in his cabin. This had a detrimental effect on the ship's discipline. Then under merchant Jeronimus Cornelisz, the third most important person on board, was on much better terms with captain Jacobsz, rather than Pelsaert, whose absence brought out the worst in both.

Cornelisz was a curious character in that he was the follower of the –at the time– much maligned philosophy of the painter Torrentius. "All religions restrict pleasure. In doing so they are contrary to the will of God, who put us on earth that we might, during our brief existence, enjoy without hindrance everything that might give us pleasure." This was not a popular view in 17th Century Holland and Torrentius was tortured for his trouble and exiled to England.

The potent mix of many men and few women without the firm hand of control then lead to a very ugly incident. The 27 year old Lucretia van den Mylen was on her way to her husband in Batavia. Her social standing meant that she had her own alcove and was accompanied by her maid. Captain Jacobsz resented her, since she had spurned his advances.

In mid-ocean Lady van den Mylen was assaulted by masked men who proceeded to, "hang overboard by her feet the Lady van den Mylen and indecently maltreat her body". She later claimed to have recognised the voice of Jan Evertsz, a man devoted to the captain.

It has been argued that the incident was all part of a grand design to provoke Pelsaert into punishing the culprits, which in turn would be the trigger for the mutiny. It is, however, unclear if the events were that well planned (there was after all a lot of money on board, and that could have provided a motive).



Shipwrecked



17th Century engraving of Batavia and Wallabi group from an illustration in the Jan Janz 1647 edition of Ongeluckige Voyagie

FOURTH of JUNE, being Monday morning, on the 2 day of Whitsuntide, with a clear full moon (2) about 2 hours before daybreak during the watch of the skipper (Ariaen Jacobsz), I was lying in my bunk feeling ill and felt suddenly, with a rough terrible movement, the bumping of the ship's rudder, and immediately after that I felt the ship held up in her course against the rocks, so that I fell out of my bunk. Whereon I ran up and discovered that all the sails were in Top, the wind South west, that during the night the course had been north east by North, and that lay right in the middle of a thick spray. Round the ship there was only a little surf, but shortly after that heard the Sea breaking hard round about. I said, "Skipper, what have you done that through your reckless carelessness you have run this noose round our necks?" (from Pelsaert's Journal)

On the morning of the fourth of June 1629, the *Batavia* was wrecked on Morning Reef, on the Houtman Abrolhos (Lat. 28° 29.422S, Long. 113 ° 47.603E), off the coast of Western Australia. She was the first of the Dutch ships lost off the west coast of Australia. The shipwreck was a prelude to an extraordinary tragedy.

Immediately following, 180 persons – among them 30 women and children – were ferried off the ship, while some 70 odd men remained, including Jeronimus Cornelisz, the undermerchant.

The survivors landed on Beacon Island. Commander Pelsaert, Captain Jakobsz and some 40 men made camp on Traitor's Island. They had rescued some ship's

provisions, barrels of biscuit and some water. That, however, was not going to sustain them for long, since there was no fresh water on these 'coral shallows'.

"At last, after having discussed it very well and weighed up that there was no hope of getting water out of the ship unless the ship should fall to pieces and it [water in barrels] should so float to land, or that there should be a good daily rain with which we could quench our thirst (but as these were all very uncertain means), resolved after long debating, as appears out of the resolution, (14) that we should go in search of water on the islands most nearby or on the continent [vaste landt] to keep them and us alive, and if we could find no water, that we should then sail with the boat without delay to Batavia, with God's grace there to relate our sad, unheard of, disastrous happening." (Pelsaert's Journal)

Thus, Commander Pelsaert, all the senior officers (except Jeronimus Cornelisz, who was still on the wreck), some crew and passengers, 48 in all, deserted the 268 on two waterless islands, whilst they went in search of water. Quickly abandoning this fruitless search on the mainland coast, they then made their way to Batavia, to obtain help. They took, in all, 33 days to get there.

On arrival in Batavia, the ship *Batavia's* high boatswain was executed, on Commander Pelsaert's indictment, for outrageous behaviour before the loss of the ship. Skipper Jacobsz was arrested, again on Pelsaert's word, for negligence.

Governor General Coen dispatched Pelsaert seven days later in the jacht *Sardam* to effect a rescue of the survivors. With extraordinary bad luck, it took 63 days to find the wreck site, almost double the time it took the ship's boat to get to Batavia.

Mutiny



In the days following Commander Pelsaert's departure the *Batavia* broke up completely drowning 40 men with her. Those who survived, which included Jeronimus Cornelisz, made it by flotsam and jetsam to the coral shallows of Beacon and Traitor islands.

The departure of the Commander in their hour of need – or so they perceived it – had left all survivors bitter and distressed. It was therefore not too difficult for Cornelisz to hand pick 40 or so men with as little scruples as he had and assert himself over them. He had his sight set to seize any relief ship that might appear and take off with it. If that failed, to spend his remaining life according to Torrentius' philosophy of seeking sensual pleasures.

In order to eliminate any opposition to his desires, he had to eliminate all remaining survivors and set out systematically to do just that.

Firstly, he sent a party of cabin boys, men and women, about 45 in number, to Seals Island (Long Island) on the claim that there was water there (which there was not). He was not expecting them to survive.

Then he instructed a group of soldiers under the command of Wiebbe Hayes to explore the 'high islands' that could be seen on the horizon. Before they left, he confiscated their arms. He did not expect them to return. After all, that was the direction to which Pelsaert had gone and he had not returned.

Next he drowned a good many by sending them out in boats on useless errands, where his accomplices would push them overboard. Having thus eliminated much potential opposition, Cornelisz set about organising the rest to be murdered, including the women and children, starting with the ill and infirm. A few of the women were kept alive, for obvious reasons. This included, not surprisingly, Lucretia van der Mylen whom he took for himself.

Noticing that the group he sent off to Seal Island lived longer than expected (they could see them wandering on the beach) he dispatched his henchmen to get rid of them, which they duly did.

The predicant, Gijsbert Bastiaenz, was witness to all these horrible deeds without the courage or power to intervene. He himself lost his wife and all his children in the massacre save his eldest daughter who was coveted by Conrad van Huysen, one of Cornelisz' conspirators. Bastiaenz was one of the few to survive and he described his ordeal in a letter that survived.

Then a smoke signal was received from one of the 'high islands', or Cats Island (now known as West Wallibi Island). Clearly Wiebbe Hayes and his soldiers had found water. This complicated matters greatly for Cornelisz. Firstly it meant they had a means to survive. Secondly, he was in danger of them warning any rescue ship approaching.

After a failed attempt to persuade Hayes and his men to join forces (they had been forewarned by some Seal Island survivors) Cornelisz sent an attack force to eliminate them. After all, Hayes and his men did not have any weapons.

When his men returned defeated the furious Cornelisz took matters in his own hand, travelling to Cats Island to use his powers of persuasion to lure the men into a deadly trap.

This is where he met the end of his gruesome reign. He and 5 of his men were overpowered and tied up. Cornelisz was kept alive, but his companions were duly executed.

It was at this point that rescue appeared on the horizon.

Rescue & Punishment



On 17 do. in the morning, with daybreak, lifted our anchor again, the wind North; were then about 2 miles from the High island, ran towards that for . (45) - Before noon, approaching the island, we saw smoke on a long island 2 miles West of the Wreck, also on another small island close by the Wreck, about which we were all very glad, hoping to find great numbers, or rather all people, alive. - Therefore, as soon as the anchor was dropped, I sailed with the boat to the highest island, which was nearest, taking with me a barrel of water, ditto bread, and a keg of wine; coming there, I saw no one, at which we wondered. I sprang ashore, and at the same time we saw a very small yawl with four Men rowing round the Northerly point; one of them, named Wiebbe Hayes, sprang ashore and ran towards me, calling from afar,

'Welcome, but go back aboard immediately, for there is a party of scoundrels on the islands near the wreck, with two sloops, who have the intention to seize the Yacht.'
(from Pelsaert's Journal)

Wiebbe Hayes further explained what had happened and that he was holding Cornelisz as prisoner. Pelsaert duly captured the remaining mutineers when they tried to board the Sardam.

When they came over, we immediately took them prisoner, and we forthwith began to examine them, especially a certain Jan Hendricxsz from Bremen , (49), soldier, who immediately confessed that he had murdered and helped to murder 17 to 20 people, under the order of Jeronimus. I asked him the origin and circumstances of this, why had they practiced such cruelties. Said the he also wished to explain how it had been with him in the beginning, - saying, that the skipper [Ariaen Jacobsz] Jeronimus Cornelisz, the Highboatswain [Jan Evertsz] and still more others, had it in mind to seize the ship Batavia before it was wrecked; to kill the Commandeur [Pelsaert] and all people except 120 towards whom they were more favourably inclined, and to throw the dead overboard into the sea and then to go pirating with the ship. (from Pelsaert's Journal)

After questioning Cornelisz, who blamed everyone but himself for all the vile deeds, Pelsaert set out to capture the final mutineers on 'Batavia's Graveyard'. When they saw the Commandant, they lay down their arms and capitulated on the spot.

In the evening I ordered the principal scoundrels and other accomplices whom I had bound here on the island, to be taken to Seals Island, from whence one could get them at an appropriate time if one wanted to examine them, so that in the meantime we would have more security. (from Pelsaert's Journal)

Pelsaert interrogated the mutineers and discovered all that had happened. Among the litany of crimes the mutineers had committed was not only the murder of many people and the rape of women, but also the looting of VOC property and valuables belonging to passengers and crew alike. The various letters and agreements that Cornelisz had drafted and the mutineers had undersigned also implicating them in treason and treachery.

*JERONIMUS CORNELISZ, of Haarlem, Apothecary, and late under Merchant of the ship Batavia, on Monday, being the first of October, as he has requested to be baptised, [shall be taken] to Seals Island, to a place made ready for it in order to exercise Justice, and there firstly to cut off both his hands, and after shall be punished on the Gallows with the Cord till Death shall follow, with confiscation of all his money, gold, Silver, monthly wages, and all claims which here in India he may have against the profits of the Gen. East India Company, our Lord Masters.
(Pelsaert's Journal)*

Following the confession of their crimes, the condemned mutineers were sentenced to their right hand cut off and in the case of Cornelisz both hands, prior to being put to death on the gallows. Seals Island was the place designated for the execution and this was carried out on 2 October 1629. Two men were left behind as punishment, while it was decided that some of the lesser offenders were to be taken back to Batavia.



Pelsaert, during this whole trial period, had diligently set about recovering the items stolen by the mutineers, as well as the chests of specie and other valuable items from the wreck, using divers from Gujarat.

On 5th December 1629, the Sardam returned to Batavia with the remaining survivors and salvaged cargo of coins and jewels. The lesser offenders, who had been flogged, keelhailed and dropped from the yard arm as punishment on the voyage home, were executed.

Later in Batavia Wiebbe Hayes and some of his men were rewarded for resisting the mutineers with a promotion. Hayes was made Sergeant and the others Corporals, carrying a higher wage, of course.

In the end, after it was all over and all the mutineers had been executed, out of 316 people aboard the *Batavia*, only 116 survived. The actual number is complicated because, from the number on board the vessel when it left Holland, some people deserted or died on the voyage, additionally one person was picked up in Sierra Leone and an unknown number of children were born on the voyage or died in the islands.