The 'Batavia', an apothecary, his mutiny and its vengeance

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Summary
In 1629, the Batavia, the flagship of the Dutch East India Company, was wrecked on the coast of what is now Western Australia. One of the many survivors was Jeronimus Cornelisz, a Dutch apothecary. He took command on shore, when the captain of the ship sailed on to get help. He led a bloody mutiny in which most of those shipwrecked were massacred, before help could arrive. He was eventually caught and hanged. The old wreck was found in 1963 and many artefacts recovered. Though Cornelisz had little time for practice, he can be seen as Australia's first doctor.

Résumé
En 1629, la "Batavia", le vaisseau amiral de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales, s'échouait sur une côte qui est maintenant celle de l'Australie occidentale. Parmi les survivants du naufrage, se trouvait un pharmacien hollandais du nom de Jérôme Cornélius. A bord, ce dernier prit la commanderie du bateau quand le capitaine était occupé à naviguer pour rejoindre le port et demander de l'aide. Cornélius se trouva ainsi à la tête d'une sanglante mutinerie au cours de laquelle la plupart des naufragés furent massacrés, avant même l'arrivée des secours. Le chef mutin fut finalement attrapé et pendu. En 1963, l'épave du vaisseau échoué a été retrouvée et de nombreux objets y ont été récupérés. Bien que Cornélius eût bien peu de temps pour pratiquer, il est considéré aujourd'hui comme le premier docteur d'Australie.
officials, and two women and a baby, 47 in all. Leaving no
senior people behind seemed a gung-ho decision and
was to have fatal consequences.

At least, in common with a number of other well
known navigational feats of the days of sail, they made a
dead reckoning and covered the 2500 kilometres in 29
days with no loss of life. On reaching his destination,
Pelsaert gathered a rescue crew and several soldiers and
set sail back again in the Zaardam on July 15th. By
coincidence, this ship had been in the original fleet, but
had become separated in a storm and had made it safely
to Batavia.

Meanwhile back at the Beacon Island there were
about 250 people, who had initially enough water for
two days. Luckily it rained heavily the next day and they
were never short of water throughout the ensuing four-
month ordeal. Even so 20 died from illness or drinking
seawater.

As the most senior man left behind by the trusting
Pelsaert, former apothecary Cornelisz took command and
rallying his old conspirators, planned to take any
rescue ship which might appear and use it for piracy.To
facilitate this he further resolved to put into effect the
scheme which was to propel him into history - to kill all
those he considered useless or uncooperative, which
meant of course most of the women and children. He
persuaded Corporal Wiebbe Hayes and 46 of the
soldiers not privy to his dastardly plan to go to look for
water on an outlying island. In their absence, Cornelisz’s
villains, joyously and incredibly, slaughtered 125 of the
remaining passengers and crew.

At first it was done by stealth at night with a sword,
followed by a hurried burial in a shallow grave. Some
were drowned, but soon any pretence of secrecy was
abandoned and people were cut down as they fled in
broad daylight. Their terror scarcely bears thinking of, for
in truth they had nowhere to flee.

One young man, Andries de Vries, pleaded for his life,
so to earn this he was allocated the task of cutting the
throats of twenty people in the sick tent. He complied,
but it was to no avail as later he was chased across the
beach and hacked to death. His skeletal body, cutlass
wounds, dislocated jaw and all, has since been identified
in the throats of twenty people in the sick tent. He complied,
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Cornelisz himself was careful to avoid actually
bloodying his hands. For one thing he was of a cowardly
nature, and second, just in case things went wrong, he
wanted to appear in at least a reasonable light. Lastly, at
least I like to think so, he was a medical man.

Several did manage to escape to join the soldiers and
Hayes to help build a small fortress on what became
known as Wiebbe Hayes Island, now West Wailabi, the
largest of the Abrolhos group. The ruined walls of this
unique structure still stand as the oldest building of
European origin, possibly of any origin, in Australia.
Nearby, they assembled a fireplace to be used to signal
to those on the main island if water was found. It was,
but the smoke plumes were never answered, a negative
response which aroused Hayes's suspicions.

Their fears were well founded and they came under
attack. They twice beat off the mutineers and Cornelisz
was actually captured during the second raid. If Hayes
had despatched Cornelisz then, things would have
worked out differently.

Meanwhile back on the Zaardem, after several
lamentable navigational errors led to wandering among
the reefs for over a month, after 63 days the rescue craft
at last arrived, just in time to thwart a third attack by the
rebels. They quickly saw the game was up and surrendered
without a shot being fired.

Jeronimus Cornelisz was bound and brought aboard
to face Commander Pelsaert. He tried to blame others
for the mutiny, but was taken away to a specially built cell
at the tip of the wreck island, Batavia's Graveyard.

Under contemporary Dutch Law if guilt was
presumed then a prisoner could be tortured until he
confessed. Jeronimus was duly tortured five times, each
time retracting his confession when the agony ceased.
When eventually the commander thought enough was
enough, he was found guilty and condemned to have
both hands cut off and then hanged. Other conspirators
were more fortunate - they were to have only one hand
cut off before hanging. The degree of degradation is
moot, but apparently death alone was considered to be
too good.

Cornelisz made several attempts to cheat the rope,
including, at the very end use of his apothecary skills, an
art he had sadly neglected over the recent past. It seems
that he had secreted some poison about his person
which he now took by mouth. We do not know what it
was, but unfortunately for him it was ineffective. All it
caused was severe abdominal pain.

With the acute symptoms, Cornelisz must have
thought that hanging was the lesser evil, for he asked for
some theriac or Venetian treacle, a treatment originally
devised in classical times as a universal antidote and
which by the 17th century was a compound of many
drugs. Doubtless it was a therapy with which the victim
was familiar. It worked, but not before he was recorded
as having been up twenty times in the night with
diarrhoea and vomiting. As Pelsaert noted in his report
'his so called miracle was working from below as well as
above.'
And so on October 2 1629, seven mutineers were hanged on the adjacent Seal Island, Cornelisz going first, minus both hands and shouting 'Revenge! Revenge!' as the noose tightened. As a chilling warning to the like minded, the bodies were left to hang until the weather and time did their stuff.

Two others had their death sentence commuted, but were abandoned on the mainland where Port Gregory is today. They disappeared without trace, which is a pity as they would have been the first Europeans to have dwelt on the Australian continent itself.

Six weeks later the Zaanem sailed for home, carrying most of the Batavia's treasure and a gig full of prisoners. Ten of the twelve treasure chests were recovered, one was split open and the contents scattered and one was jammed fast. These and many spilled artefacts such as ceramics, silverware and cannons were left as well as of course the wreck itself.

The curtain on the drama finally came down over 300 years later. Following a tip off by a resident fisherman on Beacon Island, the site of the wreck was found in 1962 by Max Cramer of Geraldton, the mainland community opposite the Abrolhos Islands. Cramer who was looking for the wreck anyway, was told that if all that he and his team wanted was the odd skeleton, there was one under the clothes line of another local fisherman, David Johnson.

Cramer and his companions sought Johnson out, and while looking at this amazing exhibit, he casually mentioned to the searchers that there were at least 10 more sets of bones under his hut. Having shown these to the incredulous Cramer, the fisherman also led the search party to where he thought the Batavia wreck was situated. It was, and Max Cramer retrieved a few artefacts which clinched the identity. He and others returned to salvage more, as well as what was left of the old wooden boat itself. The rest, as they say, is history.

If you go today to the Fremantle Maritime Museum, you will see many of these artefacts, including the now preserved wooden side of the retrieved Batavia, plus the skeleton of the terrified deVries, the trusting young man who had been mutilated and hacked to death. In the latter 1990s, a replica of the Dutch boat was constructed in Fremantle and sailed to Holland and several European ports to remind us of the mutiny and the part played by the infamous apothecary, Jeronimus Cornelisz, Australia's first doctor.

References

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