Batavia Shipwreck Site and Survivor Camps Area 1629 – Houtman Abrolhos

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The story of how the Dutch merchant vessel *Batavia* became wrecked off the coast of Western Australia in June 1629 and the bloody aftermath is a fascinating tale of maritime treachery, murder and ultimately, heroism.

The Dutch East India Company was the dominant trading company in the East Indies (Indonesia) during the 17th and 18th centuries, with its headquarters in Batavia (Jakarta). Wrecks like *Batavia's* demonstrated the necessity for more accurate charts and resulted in the commissioning of Vlamingh's 1696 voyage.

In October 1628 a Company ship, the *Batavia*, set out from Holland on her maiden journey to Batavia carrying vast wealth in silver coins and jewels. Undermerchant Jeronimus Cornelisz conspired with other officers to mutiny and seized the ship for its cargo. On 4 June 1629 the *Batavia* struck a coral reef in the Houtman Abrolhos Islands, 40 kilometres off the Western Australian coast, and sank.

Survivors managed to reach a nearby barren island, later known as 'Batavia's Graveyard'. The ship's Commander, Francisco Pelsaert, set sail in a long boat to fetch help from Batavia, more than 900 nautical miles away along a largely unknown coast. *Batavia's* skipper, Jacobsz, and 45 others accompanied Pelsaert.

In their absence, Cornelisz and his band devised a new mutiny plan. Those who might oppose the mutineers were sent to surrounding islands to seek water. In a reign of terror Cornelisz's men began murdering those remaining, beginning with the sick and the injured. As numbers dwindled and bloodlust took hold, wholesale slaughter took place with little secrecy. Survivors sent to the other islands were hunted down and killed if they had not already succumbed to thirst or hunger.

Mercenary soldier, Wiebbe Hayes, unexpectedly found water on Wallabi Island. He learned of the murders when one man managed to escape Cornelisz and swam across to join Hayes. After fighting off two attacks by the mutineers, Hayes and his men raised the alarm when Pelsaert returned from Batavia in a rescue ship.

The mutineers were tried on the island for the murder of over 120 people. Interrogated and tortured for 10 days until they signed confessions, seven were hanged. Two of the youngest mutineers, Wouter Loos and Jan Pelgrom de Bye, were sentenced to be marooned on the Australian mainland, where they became the first known European residents of Australia. No further contact with them was ever recorded.

In June 1963, the *Batavia* was discovered relatively intact when fisherman Dave Johnson showed two Geraldton divers, Max and Graeme Cramer, cannons and anchors in the waters off Morning Reef.

Two ruined huts found on West Wallabi Island, thought to have been built by Hayes and his soldiers, are believed to be the oldest structures built by Europeans on the Australian continent.

Sections of the *Batavia's* hull have been reconstructed and are displayed at the Western Australian Maritime Museum. Other artefacts are on display at the Western Australian Museum in Geraldton.

National Heritage List: 6 April 2006