

Batavia Shipwreck



Date of inscription: 6 April 2006

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 wreck and others like her prompted further discovery of the Western Australia coastline by convincing the Dutch East India Company of the necessity for more accurate charts. The Dutch East India Company was the dominant trading company in the East Indies during the 17th and 18th centuries, with its headquarters in Batavia (known today as Jakarta).

In October 1628, one of the company's ships, the *Batavia*, set out from Holland on her maiden journey to Batavia carrying vast wealth in silver coins and jewels. 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 island, later known as 'Batavia's Graveyard'. The ship's Commander, Francisco Pelsaert, landed on a nearby, smaller island. Stranded on barren and virtually waterless islands, panic set in. Pelsaert set sail in a long boat to fetch help, taking with him the skipper, Jacobsz, and 35 others. A second boat carrying 10 others followed. Unable to find water on the mainland they set sail for Batavia, more than 900 nautical miles away along a largely unknown coast.

During the voyage Undermerchant Jeronimus Cornelisz had conspired with other officers to mutiny and seize the ship for its cargo and the purpose of piracy, but the vessel sank before his plans could be realised. He then formed a select band of men and devised a new mutiny plan.

Those who might oppose the mutineers were sent to surrounding islands and instructed to find water. A reign of terror ensued as Cornelisz's men began murdering those remaining, beginning with the sick and the injured. Eventually, 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 hadn't already succumbed to thirst or hunger.

The men Cornelisz had sent to perish on Wallabi Island unexpectedly found water. Led by a mercenary soldier, Wiebbe Hayes, they learned of the murders when one man managed to escape and swam across to join Hayes. After fighting off two attacks by the mutineers, Hayes raised the alarm with Pelsaert when he 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 their 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 lobster fisherman, Dave Johnson, showed two Geraldton divers, Max and Graeme Cramer, bronze cannons and anchors in the waters off Morning Reef.

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

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

