



OUR MARITIME HISTORY

BY BEN DERECKI

THIS PICTURE: The Batavia's appearance betrayed the quality of some of its crew.

OPPOSITE: 1985 saw a replica of the Batavia commenced.



The **Batavia** Mutiny

In 1629 the Western Australian coastline hosted a story that shocked Europe. It was the Australian version of *The Lord of the Flies* and it took place off the coast of Geraldton.

Hands up who can recall reading William Golding's book *The Lord of the Flies* in High School? If you're too young (or too old) to know about it the storyline went something like this. A group of boys get marooned on a deserted tropical island. The event starts off as a big adventure with leaders being elected, food being hunted and supplies being stored. But it eventually turns to chaos as their time away from civilization grows. All of a sudden self-preservation kicks in, the group divides into tribes, the tribes are split by leadership challenges and it becomes the survival of the fittest until eventually a ship passing by stops and rescues them.

If that doesn't ring any bells then you might be more familiar with *The Simpsons* version of it back in Series 9. The show was called *Das Bus* and it saw Springfield Elementary going on an excursion until Otto manages to drive the bus off a bridge, the bus sinks and the kids end up on a deserted island. The story follows the *Lord of the Flies* plot but in true Simpsonian style the group is apparently rescued by Moe... which differs slightly from the original story.

The Western Australian coastline has had its own *Lord of the Flies* story but it's a story that Matt Groening and his crew of cartoonists would have steered a wide berth of in the creation of their light hearted approach. And the story is of a level that even Golding's himself may have thought was too far into the realm of fiction to write about. It's a tale that the captain in the story later wrote about under the title *The Disastrous Voyage of the Ship Batavia*.

THE SHIP

The *Batavia* was built in Amsterdam in 1628 under the commission of the

United East India Trading Company. The ship was around 45 metres from bow to stern and was one of the larger ships around at that time.

It was primarily built for shipping cargo but was also required to be fitted for a range of other purposes such as passenger transportation as well as be a quasi naval vessel to counter attacks of rival cargo ships, pirates and even warships. Despite its core purpose the *Batavia* still had an armoury of 24 cast iron cannons and 8 other guns for its own protection.

Life on board the *Batavia* was fine – if you were a wealthy passenger. Otherwise it was an uncomfortable life. There were approximately 340 people onboard its first and only journey and those who weren't sufficiently prosperous lived on top of each other while the toffs mixed and ate in the Captain's cabin in complete

contrast to those below.

Food on these journeys was generally limited in its variety and health value, drinking water was of poor quality and the conditions themselves led to an easy spread of disease if anything was to catch on. Scurvy was often rife among the lower classes of passengers and crew given the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables available.

THE JOURNEY

The *Batavia's* ill-fated voyage took place in October 1628 and it set sail from Texel in the Netherlands traveling to Batavia, what we now know as Jakarta.

From the start of the journey things just weren't right and the bad relationship between the Fleet Commander and the Skipper didn't make things pleasant either. Seven



months into the voyage plans for a mutiny were being hatched with the Skipper, Ariaen Jacobsz, being at the forefront of the idea. The start of the plan saw the Batavia steered away from the other ships in the fleet and the idea was that when the ship was sufficiently separated from the rest of the fleet the captain and his friends would be fed to the sharks. But before any more could happen fate intervened.

A few hours before dawn on June 4 the boat struck Morning Reef, two miles from Beacon Island, in the Abrolhos Islands. The boat held fast and after judging there was no way it could be retrieved the evacuation began. After many trips between the closest islands and the ship most passengers and crew were retrieved with

only thirty people drowning in the process of the rescue, which was an amazing effort considering the stormy weather and the number of people (340) people on the boat.

The next days saw a survey of the islands take place and realising there was insufficient water, food and shelter the Fleet Commander, Francois Pelsaert, and some crew members set off for Java in one of the Batavia's 30 foot long-boats. Leaving behind 280 people they continued their journey and on arrival in Java they sourced a ship called the Saardam before sailing back to rescue the survivors.

What they found on their return shocked them to the core.

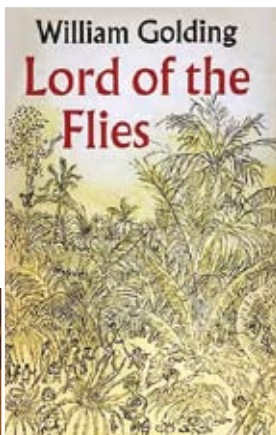
THE WAIT

When Pelsaert and his men had left for Java, Jeronimus Cornelisz was

set in charge of the people and the islands. Over the course of the eight weeks Pelsaert was away Cornelisz began a vicious rule over the islands and as food and water began to run out he resorted to murdering his fellow survivors.

Through the work of his henchmen, some of the original men who backed his mutiny while the ship was still afloat, around 125 men, women and children were massacred. Some were clubbed to death, others were strangled and some were drowned. On occasions a group of people would be executed. Other times individuals were taken. Some of the women were kept alive only to service the men whenever they needed it.

This treachery saw the survivors divide into two groups on separate islands. One island housed Cornelisz and his men with all the guns and swords. The other group, having no weapons, but on a separate island, set



"The event was truly Western Australia's Lord of the Flies."

RIGHT: Golding's original cover – The Lord of the Flies. THIS PICTURE: The restored section of the Batavia's hull in Fremantle.



up a barricade to protect themselves from the Lord of the Flies. This fortification was successful in repelling a number of attacks and was ultimately responsible for their survival.

Cornelisz and his cronies stitched up another plan amongst all this mayhem. If at some stage a rescue ship arrived they planned to hijack it, and with the money they hoped to salvage from the wreck of the Batavia, head off to make a new life with their newfound riches.

On Pelsaert's return though events took a turn which saw this plot fail to come to pass.

THE JUDGEMENT

On the arrival of the rescue ship the mutiny was put down and Pelsaert set up a formal court to judge the insurgents. The final outcome saw seven men hanged on Seal Island, Cornelisz being first after having both his hands cut off and two men were left on the mainland of Australia never to be heard from again.

The arrival in Batavia saw more trials take place with a number of minor offenders being executed after being keelhauled or flogged. Pelsaert was also deemed responsible for the outcome of the mutiny and had his title, wages and possessions removed and sadly he died only one year later.

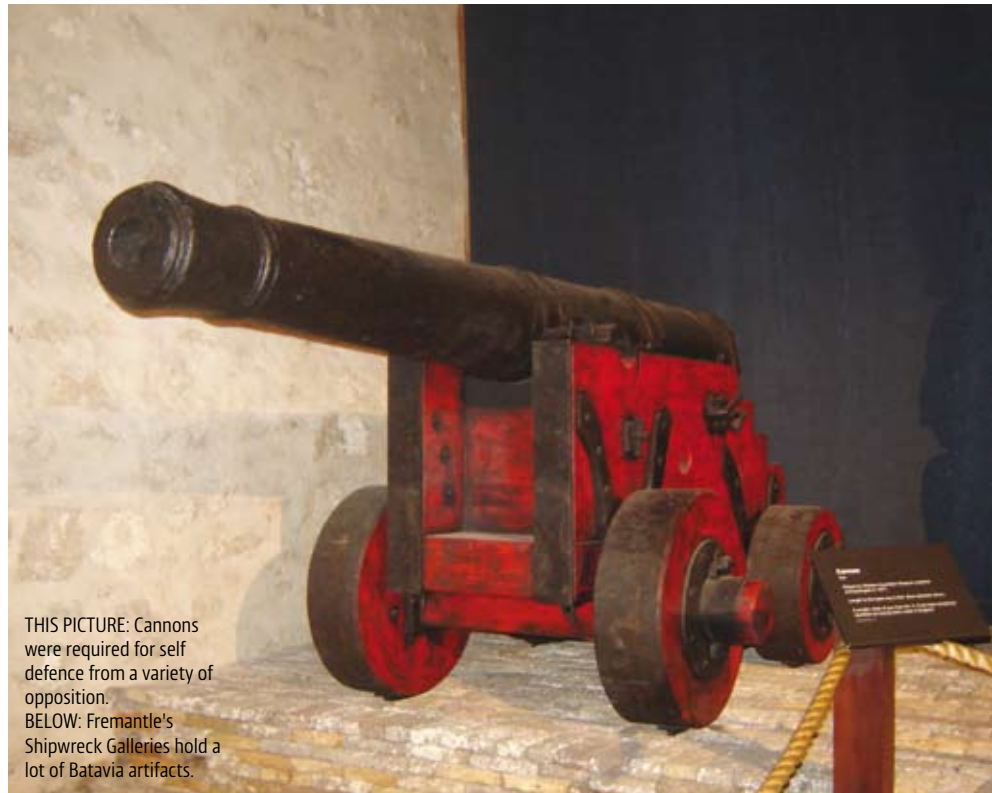
Of the 340 passengers and crew that originally boarded that boat back in Texel, around 100 only survived. The event was truly Western Australia's Lord of the Flies.

HISTORY TODAY

In 1972, three hundred and forty years later, marine archaeologist began to excavate the wreck site. During this time they found a large piece of the Batavia's hull that had been preserved in the coral and it was brought back to Fremantle to be restored.

The treatment to retain the hull was incredible. As waterlogged wood dries out it cracks and warps and it can sometimes totally destroy the whole piece of wood. In order to stop this the water in the wood was replaced over a number of years with 'polyethylene glycol', a water-soluble wax.

The reconditioned section of the hull can now be found in the Fremantle Shipwreck Galleries in a large temperature and humidity



THIS PICTURE: Cannons were required for self defence from a variety of opposition.
BELOW: Fremantle's Shipwreck Galleries hold a lot of Batavia artifacts.



monitored room. You'll also find an amazing range of objects such as cannons, a portico made from bricks on the ship, anchors and other day-to-day shipping objects.

In 1985 a replica of the Batavia commenced being built in a Dutch shipyard. The project attempted to retain as much of the original style as possible and saw a number of

historical and archived records used as well as the traditional tools and materials for ship building. It was officially named in 1995 and a few years later undertook a year long voyage to Australia before returning home.

The story of the Batavia, which might better be called the nightmare of the Batavia, has been preserved.