

Information sheet no 107

HMS* *Bounty*

In 1787, a proposal to introduce the Tahitian breadfruit to the colonies was presented to the British authorities in the West Indies. It was argued that this crop would be suitable for the slave workers on the sugar plantations as it was cheap to produce and could grow throughout the year. In May 1787, after a consultation with Sir Joseph Banks, the President of the Royal Society, King George III issued an order to the Admiralty to pursue the challenge of transporting breadfruit seedlings to the Caribbean.

The Admiralty were concerned not to spend too much on the expedition and inspected several ships for the task. *Bethia*, a merchant ship built in Hull around 1784, was considered the most suitable vessel and purchased for £1,950. On 16 August 1787, on the recommendation of Joseph Banks, Lieutenant William Bligh RN was appointed to command the ship. Bligh had been on the last voyage of Captain James Cook during 1775-1779 and had demonstrated great skill in navigation and had acquired a good knowledge of the Pacific islands. Bligh recommended various alterations to the ship that would be needed for the Pacific voyage. The ship's hold was restructured to accommodate the breadfruit cargo and the sail area shortened to withstand strong winds that affected the Pacific area. Additionally, cannons were added to offset any possible conflict that might occur with native people. The ship was renamed *Bounty* in honour of the King's patronage of the project.

On 23 December 1787, HMS *Bounty* departed from Portsmouth and made its way to Tenerife. Bligh was concerned for the welfare of his crew and he began to introduce his plans to ensure that they remained in good health. He introduced a new and humane watch system, which would give the men four days on and eight hours off. The man whom Bligh gave the command of this watch was Fletcher Christian. Christian had come from an influential although impoverished Manx (Isle of Man) family and had sailed with Bligh on two previous voyages. They are said to have been firm friends and Christian's promotion to Acting Lieutenant by Bligh had effectively made him the second in command of the *Bounty*, overlooking the ship's Master, John Fryer, causing some resentment.

Bligh was keen to arrive at the Pacific as quickly as possible and attempted to sail around Cape Horn, notorious for violent storms. The ship did not progress well and Bligh was forced to turn back and sail for the Cape of Good Hope, the longer route to the Pacific. It is to Bligh's credit that none of his crew suffered from ill health but throughout the journey, tensions were beginning to grow. Bligh was a stickler for discipline and appeared to apply it harshly. This incurred hostility from the crew. They did not appreciate Bligh's health regime for nutrition and exercise for their benefit and it was also discovered that the Surgeon was addicted to alcohol and unable to properly perform his duties.

On 26 October 1788, HMS *Bounty* finally dropped anchor at Matavai Bay, Tahiti. Although the accumulation of breadfruit seedlings did not take long to achieve, their departure was delayed by five months. The crew succumbed to the island's culture and the hospitality of the native people. The *Bounty* finally departed on 5 April 1789 but the resumption of a restrictive naval life after life on the island increased tension on board ship.

Information sheet no 107

Bligh became increasingly enraged by the indifference some of the crew to their duties and used the harsh naval discipline to restore order. Christian was not immune from Bligh's anger and became agitated from receiving the brunt of Bligh's verbal attacks. The strain between the two men reached its peak when Bligh publicly accused him of stealing some coconuts from the ship's store. Humiliated, Christian decided to make an honourable escape from the ship to a nearby island. After learning that he had the sympathy of other discontented crew, Christian then decided it was Bligh who should leave the *Bounty*. On the morning of 28 April 1789, the mutineers dragged Bligh to the deck of the ship from his cabin and despite pleas to Christian for mutual forgiveness, the Captain and nineteen other men loyal to the Captain were cast adrift in the launch.

With Christian in command, HMS *Bounty* returned to Tahiti to collect livestock, men and women. Christian intended to settle on Tubuai but came into conflict with the natives there and returned to Tahiti. Sixteen men decided to remain at Tahiti. With the remaining eight *Bounty* crew and a group of Tahitian men and women, including his own native wife, the *Bounty* left Tahiti on 23 September 1789. From studying Bligh's charts, Christian headed for a remote uninhabited island marked as Pitcairn's Island. Christian displayed his own qualities of navigation and leadership in taking the ship over nearly 2000 miles to the incorrectly charted territory.

HMS *Bounty* reached Pitcairn's Island on 15 January 1790. It was found to be habitable and the company began to build a settlement. The *Bounty* was stripped of all that could be used and finally set on fire and destroyed. In 1793, conflict erupted from the resentment of the Tahitian men towards the white mutineers' assumptions of supremacy and privilege. Many were killed in the resulting violence including, it is commonly believed, Fletcher Christian.

After being cast off HMS *Bounty*, Bligh and his company began an epic journey. The overcrowded launch drifted for nearly forty-seven days and 3,600 miles. Bligh's great achievement was that he navigated the launch without the aid of a chart or any means of obtaining the longitude. Whilst struggling to survive, Bligh produced highly accurate charts and surveys of the seas, the Fijian Islands and the north east coast of Australia. On 17 June 1789, the launch finally reached Coupang in the Dutch colony of Timor. On 14 March 1790, Bligh arrived back at Portsmouth. He faced court-martial to answer for his loss of HMS *Bounty* and was acquitted. He published his account of the mutiny and of his voyage to Timor in July and was hailed as a hero.

In 1791, he was again appointed to command a second expedition to retrieve and transport breadfruit to the Caribbean. This time, his ship, HMS *Providence*, had a complement of Marines on board and was accompanied by another ship HMS *Assistant*, under the command of Nathaniel Portlock.

The Admiralty was determined to make an example of the mutineers and sent out HMS *Pandora*, under the command of Captain Edwards, to apprehend them. HMS *Pandora* reached Matavai Bay on 23 March 1791 and fourteen of the sixteen mutineers there were arrested. The other two had been killed earlier. Unable to find Christian and his eight followers, Edwards departed from Tahiti. Unfortunately, *Pandora* struck rocks on Australia's Great Barrier Reef and four more mutineers lost their lives. Finally returning to England on 19 June 1792, the surviving mutineers were tried in September on the HMS *Duke*. Three were found guilty and publicly hanged on board HMS *Brunswick* whilst the remainder were acquitted.

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Information sheet no 107

The remaining mutineers, notably Peter Heywood and James Morrison, attracted much publicity during the court-martial and subsequently published their own accounts of the mutiny, portraying the Captain as an appalling commander, whose abuse of power had driven the crew to revolt. Edward Christian, a Professor of Law at Cambridge, sought to protect the reputation of his brother Fletcher and produced a damning account of Bligh's leadership in an appendix of the published minutes of the court-martial's proceedings. When the newly promoted Captain Bligh returned to England in August 1793 after a successful second attempt in transporting the breadfruit to the Caribbean, he found a less enthusiastic reception.

Bligh remained in naval service for a number of years and gained respect for his actions during the battle of Camperdown in 1797 (HMS *Director*) and subsequently in the battle of Copenhagen in 1802 (HMS *Glatton*), winning personal praise from Nelson himself. In March 1805, Bligh was appointed Governor of New South Wales and during his tenure, came into conflict with various landowners, settlers and officials. He was deposed in a second mutiny of soldiers of the New South Wales Corps, led by Major George Johnson, and was arrested and detained in HMS *Porpoise*. Eventually allowed to leave, he returned to England and arranged for the court martial of Johnson, who was dismissed from the service. Bligh also faced a second court martial but was again acquitted. He was promoted to Rear Admiral and later Vice Admiral but did not receive any important command again. He died in 1817 and buried in Lambeth.

In February 1808, nearly twenty years after the mutiny, Captain Folger of the American vessel, *Topaz*, landed at Pitcairn's Island and was surprised to find it inhabited. He encountered Alexander Smith (who was also known by the alias John Adams), the sole survivor of the *Bounty* mutineers, who was now the head of the community on the remote island. It was decided to leave the settlement in peace.

* *Note:* Different designations for the *Bounty* have been used in various contemporary documents relating to the ship and the events that occurred. These range from HMAT (His Majesty's Armed Transport), HMAV (His Majesty's Armed Vessel) and HMS (His Majesty's Ship). There is no consistency in the use of these prefixes even within the same Admiralty documents. Captain Bligh himself used the prefixes inconsistently within the original log and his subsequent publications. This has led to general interchangeable use ever since by historians. For the sake of consistency and for our general audience, we have opted to use the prefix HMS throughout our sheet.