

BOUNTY DAY on the PICTON CASTLE

By Captain Dan Moreland

Almost every year since 1790 on little Pitcairn Island at 25 South latitude and 130 west longitude deep in the South Pacific Ocean, the islanders have held a celebration on January 23. All the islanders gather down at the landing in Bounty Bay, a cement jetty poured over the rocks that the BOUNTY Crew landed on so long ago and set afire to a model of that famous ship right over the bones of the old girl that all this is named for. This day is also celebrated at Norfolk Island north of New Zealand too but that's another story. This celebration is much like Canada Day or the 4th of July, fireworks (in the form of the burning BOUNTY) and BBQ and picnic food and cool drinks, swimming, playing around, fishing if the seas are ok, so we celebrate it as well aboard the PICTON CASTLE. We celebrate the national day of each our crew and a couple more besides. "Bounty Day" is Pitcairn's founding day. As we have two Pitcairn Islanders in our crew (one absent for now) we must carry out this tradition. But where does Bounty Day come from? What is Bounty Day?

1787 - A Ship Sails

In 1787 the very small wooden sailing ship, HAM BOUNTY set out from England by herself bound for the South Seas. She was not a regular naval vessel. She was a small sailing freighter bought, rerigged and refitted by the Royal Navy to sail to Tahiti for an unusual task, unprecedented perhaps. She sailed not for exploration, not for diplomatic purposes, not for conquest, not for scientific reasons - she was sent out to collect a single plant that might have value to private commercial interests, to collect and bring back something called "breadfruit". Of commercial value perhaps but far from any public benefit.

Cheap Food for Enslaved Workers in the Caribbean

Wealthy Sugar cane planters of Jamaica, many living in England, had heard about this "breadfruit" from James Cook's voyages; it sounded simply like bread that grew on trees and fell off into waiting arms when done or ripe. Bread growing on trees! Sounded to good to be true. These absentee planters figured that if they could get this 'breadfruit' growing in Jamaica they would not have to allow their slaves so much time away from working the cane fields in order to grow their own food to feed themselves; they could then get even more stolen labour out of their stolen workers. These planters, some of whom were in Parliament, were also very influential in England, and this influence was brought to bear in pressuring the Royal Navy into creating the BOUNTY expedition to get cheap (free) food to increase these planters profits. Although many of them could have easily funded such an expedition privately to collect some breadfruit, in the classic ways of elite sector/government boondoggle through political pressure the cost of the expedition was born by the Navy. Hey, why pay for something you can get the government to do for free? - So the story of government bailouts for big corporations is nothing new, now back to the story - This being a minor task as viewed by a Royal Navy more accustomed to fighting France, they seemed to take limited interest in it. After many delays this little ship, no more than 90 feet long, with by all accounts a happy crew aboard, set sail for Tahiti, already a legend, on the far side of the world.

William Bligh and Fletcher Christian

In command of the BOUNTY was LT William Bligh, 35 years old, a career naval officer who had been on 'half pay', a form of lay-off from the Navy when not at war. He had been sailing commercially in recent years, he was recalled for the BOUNTY expedition. This was his first significant naval command. Having served with distinction under Cook in the South Pacific he was a logical choice. He was also extremely keen to sail in his mentor Cook's wake in every way. This intense keenness and ambition probably contributed to accepting operational conditions less than ideal for such an expedition. Among other things, he had asked to be made a Post Captain which would give him more authority, that got nixed. He was also the sole naval officer aboard. There were no lieutenants, no squad of marines to back him up that would have been typical and prudent for a naval vessel on a long voyage to have. One young man who had sailed with Bligh several times before in merchant ships back and forth to the West Indies was Fletcher Christian, 24 years old, joined as well, for the first time in a naval vessel. It seems that Bligh and Christian knew each other well, even socially and were on fairly intimate terms. My surmise is that this relative closeness would make things even worse later on, for both men.

A Long Voyage...

Following orders Bligh headed south from England to sail west around Cape Horn, the shortest route to Tahiti. The season was well advanced and due to the treacherous storms with their violent westerly winds right on the nose of a sailing ship off that infamous cape (actually an island) Bligh, after fighting hard beating to the west to get his little ship around the Horn, wisely turned the BOUNTY to the east and made the much longer (by five or six thousand miles) but down wind voyage to Tahiti around the Cape of Good Hope, the southern Indian Ocean, south of Australia, south of New Zealand, south of all the South Pacific Islands until he reached Matavai Bay, Tahiti. This alone was a remarkable achievement by a very capable mariner. Matavai Bay with its black volcanic sand beach looking today much as it must have these years ago, is a short bus ride from down-town Papeete. It is a magical Bay.

Bligh was under orders apparently to be deceptive to the Tahitians about the nature of his visit. He was to lie about wanting breadfruit. Again, so wealthy English planters could more wealthy and get even more free work from their enslaved workers in the islands - bearing mind that slavery had been declared illegal in England in 1772 as being odious and contrary to the natural and common law of England. But somehow not declared illegal in English territorial possessions like the Caribbean islands or in British North America. A little bit like a US Congressman owning a cocaine processing plant in Columbia or poppy fields in Afghanistan, not exactly but you get the idea and since it involves 'owning' people and their working and dying off at astronomical rates as if in a charnel house, perhaps quite a bit worse.

Tahitian Idyll

The BOUNTY remained anchored in and around Matavai Bay for about six months while the Bounty gardeners collected and sprouted breadfruit shoots eventually collecting over

1,000 young plants. Life was good for an 18th century Naval Mariner in Tahiti. Friends were made, strong associations formed by some. Heaps of food, hunting, fishing, little work, ideal weather, attentive ladies, dances, swimming daily, good fun Tahiti. Eventually it came time to sail. Bligh had waited to sail, in part, for the passing of the southern hemisphere cyclone season for his homeward passage westward bound through the South Pacific, through the Torres Straights for Cape Town and back to England. This was sound planning. But it meant spending a very long time in Tahiti. Joseph Conrad once said, "ports rot both ships and men".

Temper, Temper

For now we can leave the exploration of the causes of the mutiny on the BOUNTY by Fletcher Christian against William Bligh to others. There must have been many contributing factors, but for now it seems to have been at least as much about Bligh's personal and capricious treatment of Christian as much as anything else. Called a "tyrant" in some publications, the record reveals that Bligh was not a harsh disciplinarian, if anything he was enlightened and even lenient by the standards of the day. He was not an unreasonable Master by any recorded measure. He was certainly a gifted and enormously capable seaman. It is well recorded how he cared for the welfare of his crew in so many particulars. But he had a temper, a vicious volcanic temper. A histrionic, flame throwing, paint stripping temper. And Fletcher Christian became the object of this sulphurous temper. He chewed Christian out, his chief officer, in front of the ships' complement repeatedly in Tahiti and after. This is a completely unacceptable leadership flaw today. But much more to the point it was also just as completely unacceptable 220 years ago too. And Fletcher really wasn't a naval officer, he was elevated to his position of second in command entirely due to warm feelings on Bligh's part and due to Bligh's lack of faith in other senior staff aboard. While a capable mariner Fletcher had not grown up in the Navy with all its harsh discipline. And anyway, you cannot chew out a senior subordinate in front of a crew without expecting serious repercussions of some sort. You can not now, you could not then either. Bligh was also under enormous personal pressure with scant few of the basic resources that a Royal Naval officer in command could reasonably expect to have in 1789. No doubt making his already volatile temper all the worse.

"I am in hell" F.C.

So early one morning, breadfruit sprouts in pots happily below, only three weeks after sailing from Tahiti, a few miles off the island of Tofua in the Tonga group, and after having a strip torn off by Bligh the day before (and later invited to dinner with Bligh as if nothing had happened) one too many times (and w/no doubt other reasons as well) and stewing about it for some time and apparently at the suggestion of one of the others, Christian hastily took the ship, with what appears to be, little planning. During the course of the mutiny, in the few hours it took to get the boat launched and loaded, it also appears as if Christian regretted this rash move. But he knew enough about the navy to know there could be no turning back, regrets or not. One cannot apologise ones way out of a mutiny even as Bligh said he would forget all about it if restored to command. A surprising number and the majority of the BOUNTY crew preferred to get into the ships launch and take their chances with Bligh than stay on the BOUNTY with Christian and

the mutineers. The BOUNTY launch rowed away with 19 people aboard, grossly overloaded. To think that they would never make it to land, never mind England or survive at all would have been a reasonable assessment. But they did; under Bligh's remarkable navigation and pained but effective leadership and management they sailed their small open boat, no larger than our 23' Monomoy, almost 4,000 miles through Fijian waters, Torres Straights to West Timor at Kupang and onto Batavia (Jakarta, Java, Indonesia) where they then started dropping like flies due to local diseases. Some including Bligh getting back to England by ship from Batavia.

A New Island Home

The BOUNTY with Christian in command returned to Tahiti to a cool reception for a spell then off again wandering the South Pacific looking for a place to settle. After some bad starts on inhabited islands Christian, still very much in charge and perhaps more so, concluded that they needed an uninhabited island with no obvious harbour. So he put into Tahiti for another very brief visit and even cooler reception. They stayed under a day at Tahiti this time. Some islanders piled onboard for an adventure (or were kidnapped). Christian left in Tahiti those BOUNTY sailors who wanted to stay, 16 of them, some mutineers, some who were not - that is another story. Christian and eight remaining mutineers, 13 island women, six island men set out to find an island of their own.

Bound For Pitcairn's Island

After sailing to Tonga and some remote islands near Fiji Christian made for Pitcairn's Island far away to east, first heading south from the Fijis until he caught favourable westerlies and sailed about 3,500 miles direct for the region where he could look for Pitcairn and then curve up around to get well east of the island and run down its latitude. Fletcher would have known of Pitcairn due to Bligh's library of voyages he had with him. Pitcairn had been discovered about twenty years before and fit the description of an island that he sought for a refuge from the Royal Navy which he knew would send a ship out at some point to either look for the BOUNTY and Bligh if Bligh did not show up somewhere. Or look for Christian and the BOUNTY if Bligh did get home somehow, as unlikely as that was. But Fletcher would have known something else too. He would have known that Pitcairn's Island would have likely been well plotted for latitude but badly plotted for longitude. He knew it would be positioned incorrectly on the chart and he knew that he could find it. It had only been in quite recent years, with the development of the chronometer that longitude could be precisely determined. BOUNTY had aboard one of the very first generation of these remarkable seagoing chronometers. Fletcher knew that Pitcairn existed, knew it was far off the beaten track - and that ship coming from England would go to Tahiti first and then find it very difficult to get to Pitcairn 2,000 miles to windward - he knew it was uninhabited but well forested with springs of fresh water and no discernable harbour - I submit that at some point Christian made up his mind to find Pitcairn specifically and this he did. It was also a well thought out choice given all the factors on his mind.

Landfall Pitcairn - Heaven on Earth

About eight months after the mutiny the much reduced band of BOUNTY crew, island men and women found Pitcairn as much as Christian expected. A small but high island with crashing surf all around and , no reef or lagoon, no harbour at all. Lush and green with rich forest, good for making houses, even better good for hiding within. In short order the ship was run aground under Ship Landing Point in Bounty Bay close to the base of the jetty where the road starts up the "Hill of Difficulty". She was stripped as much as was practical. So any passing ship would not see any remains of a shipwreck and hopefully leave them in peace, on January 23 , 1790 the BOUNTY was burned to the waterline. There is a reliable account from a Tahitian woman who returned to Tahiti that Christian wanted to preserve the BOUNTY and not destroy her. It is difficult to imagine how that would be even possible for very long anchored at Pitcairn. As it turns out, the record indicates that the Bounty gang or at least their children were left in peace for 24 years before two English Navy ships happened upon Pitcairn although an American sealer, the TOPAZ stopped by after 18 years. By then all the mutineers but one, John Adams, were dead. Nine of the women survived well past recontact time. Christians wife Mauatua living to 1841 and even returning to Pitcairn after an ill hatched scheme to remove all Pitcairners to Tahiti and Teraura, Midshipman Edward Young's wife lived to 1850. These women, eye witness to much that occurred after the mutiny and intimate with the principle mutineers, were never interviewed by the Royal Navy or anyone else regarding events surrounding the BOUNTY, only John Adams was interviewed and his various accounts differ from each other. That too, is another story.

Bligh Gets Another Shot at Fetching Breadfruit

The Royal Navy, in a tacit admission of screwing up a little in so casually supporting the mission; but also to show this was not Bligh's fault or the Navy's, increasingly common notions circulating around England at the time, they sent out a second expedition, with Bligh in command this time as a Post Captain, with two ships (just in case), plenty of officers and lots of marines. They got their plants and got back to sea as quickly as they could, no hanging around in seductive Tahiti! They got their breadfruit and sailed for the West Indies putting in at St Vincent and Jamaica. A nephew of Bligh was on this expedition and his journal is replete with references to his uncle's temper, which it was said, was "like a passing tropical squall, black and ferocious one moment but gone in another with the sun shining again and breeze blowing fairly, all forgotten". All the many breadfruit trees around the Caribbean today are descended from these plants. While fairly popular today in the Caribbean, available in any open air market, we are told the slaves back in those days did not eat breadfruit much. They did not like it.

HAPPY BOUNTY DAY!!!

VIVA PITKERN ISLAND!!!