I SAILED WITH CAPTAIN COOK

My name is Nathan Pitt. I was born in 1753 in Whitby, Yorkshire, a port town in England off the North Sea. Like my father and my two older brothers, I took to sail to earn a living. I aimed to see different parts of the world while trying to make something of myself.

I started -- as all must -- as a novice Landsman sailor when I was sixteen, doing the lowliest and meanest jobs. But by the time I turned nineteen, I had earned my Able Seaman’s papers. I had mastered the art of tying marine knots, the raising and lowering of each canvas sheet, how to set and climb all the riggings, and work the many blocks and tackle deck side. Now I was aloft in the masts, yards, and spars -- skilled and respected, with 25% better pay as well. It was then that I was offered a chance to sail with Captain James Cook on HMS Resolution. This was to be his second major expedition, this time to search for the supposed Terra Australis – the Great Southern Continent. Luck was with me, and I was finally chosen as ship’s crew, one of 116 souls. These included 90 seamen, 18 Royal Marines, 6 officers (one who doubled as a surgeon), an artist (William Hodges), and an astronomer (William Wales).

Our vessel was well-built and sturdy, a former 462 ton collier coincidently launched in 1770 in my hometown of Whitby. She measured 111 feet long and 35 feet abeam. She was fitted with twelve light 6-pounder guns and twelve swivel guns. The Resolution was also fitted with the latest navigational aids such as the Larcum Kendall K1 chronometer, an azimuth compass, ice anchors, and an apparatus for distilling fresh water from sea water. A leaping, gold-painted horse was our bow's figurehead. Our companion ship on this voyage was HMS Adventure, commanded by Captain Tobias Furneaux.

Bidding farewell to my beloved Mother and three sisters (the other men in my family still being away at sea), I set sail with my shipmates from Plymouth Sound on 13 July, 1772. In the ship’s hold were our provisions, which were typical for the Royal Navy: hard biscuit, salt beef, salt pork, suet, olive oil, beer, and spirits. To help fight the scourge of scurvy, Captain Cook wisely supplied our vessel with pickled cabbage (called Sour Krout), citrus fruits, and carrot marmalade – all rich in Vitamin C. As for live animals for fresh meat, we carried bullocks, sheep, goats (for milking), hogs, chickens, and geese. In addition, trade goods for the natives -- which we were told we would undoubtedly encounter -- included such items as knives, axes, beads, ribbons, and medallions.

My first impression when I personally clapped eyes up close on Captain Cook was of his commanding height. He was easily a head taller than me, so I assumed he was over six feet tall. Although his head seemed somewhat small for his body, his clean-shaven face afforded him the look of strength and determination: his brown eyes were clear under bushy eyebrows, his jaw was firm and set, his cheekbones were high, and his nose was long and straight. His ruddy complexion was finely seasoned from years of sun, wind, and salt spray. The Captain also had a healthy head of dark brown hair, which was long and pulled back, and tied. I later learned that he was forty-four years old that year.

Imagine my surprise during our fourth day at sea when Cook overheard my speaking to one of my shipmates as we were heading aloft, and called me aside.

"I say, do I detect the accent of a fellow Yorkshireman? Tell me, lad, what is your name and where are you from?" the Captain asked me cordially, slightly smiling.

After I responded, Cook added, "Yes, I know Whitby. It was there that I first learned my mariner skills years ago, as a young man like you. It's fine town. I myself was born in Marton, some miles north... Well, good to have you on board. Back to work with you now, Able Seaman Pitt. Carry on." The Captain then turned with his thoughts and gazed out at the blue expanse of the Atlantic as we continued heading south, clasping his strong, large hands behind his back.

Meal time on board ship was always looked forward to -- a happy crew is a well-fed crew, as they say -- but it was always segregated according to class: officers and gentlemen dined with the Captain, Able 'Topmen' like myself ate with our seven-man climbing teams, military men supped with their fellows, and the majority Ordinary seaman likewise ate together. I eagerly shared my private encounter with Cook with my mates over dinner that evening.

"Aye, our Captain is a good one and true, and he's sharp as a tack," Tipper Hawley offered. "Did you know he was common-raised with simple farming folk? I heard he had but four years of real schooling, yet he rose through the ranks of the Royal Navy by using his brains and his guts rather than through the usual wealth and upper-class connections. He knows the seas and the currents, and he can read any coming weather. He's a genius, they say, in navigation and chart-making. Mostly taught himself map-reading, mathematics and astronomy, can you imagine?"

"The Old Man is known to be strict but fair," Amos Markum added. "He keeps a very clean and tidy ship, and keeps us healthy with good grub. No sickness or disease will be allowed on the Resolution. Cook keeps morale high and makes sure that everyone is busy. They say he never gets angry -- or goes for the Cat, or makes you run the Gauntlet -- unless you disobey an order, fall asleep on watch, or shirk your duty. It's then that you'll pay the devil, by God!" The other gathered shipmates nodded or said 'aye' in agreement.

"And I hear Cook is so strong that he can twist a iron horseshoe out of shape -- just with his bare hands!" exclaimed Edward Penny. "Though I can't say that I've actually seen it with me own eyes," he muttered and shyly looked down.

Skilled Topmen like myself were proud of our social station aboard ship. We favored colorful clothes, wore our hair braided in distinctive fashions, grew our beards, and enjoyed wearing fancy jewelry -- rings, bracelets, necklaces, even earrings. Many of my mates were also tattooed from previous voyages to the South Seas, so naturally I looked forward to getting one too once we arrived on a tropical island. But first we had to endure the expected frozen wastes of Terra Australis. If any of us feared exploring that great unknown, it was never apparent. But there was some unspoken anxiety and concern, of that I was certain --if from no one else but myself.

During our off-duty hours, the Ordinary and Able crew freely mingled, often after our daily grog ration. We told endless stories (whether truth or lies, nobody minded), whittled pieces of wood into wistful or practical objects, sang songs, played musical tunes, danced, practiced our knot skills, repaired our clothes with needle and thread, played cards or rolled dice, or simply smoked our pipes and daydreamed. Because few sailors could read or write (beyond crudely signing their name), I was often asked to read aloud from books gratefully loaned by our ship's officers, or to write a dictated letter to a loved one, to be later posted at our next port-o-call. Meanwhile, talk inevitably turned to memories of home, or to Mother's tasty cooking, or to missing one's wife and children, or to various willing barmaids who could show a man 'a really good time.' When it came to sex, everyone bragged, of course, about being an expert with the ladies.

"When we get to Tahiti and Tonga, you young lads are in for a real treat!" gushed old Tom McDuff, a veteran Scotsman from Aberdeen and Ordinary seaman who also acted as ship's blacksmith. "The brown-skinned lassies run around bare naked, and live for naught but lovemaking, and their men folk just sit around and laugh and don't mind when you enjoy yerself with their women day or night, or even both! They will wear out yer manhood, I know...I've been there and had all I could handle! But be sure the women you bed are clean before you slip in your pike, or mark my words, you'll wind up getting the Venus Pox and spend the rest of yer life miserable and in agony every time you piss." The other sailors grimly grunted, guffawed, or sat in knowing silence.

HMS Resolution reached Funchal in the Madeira Islands on August 1, and our ship took on fresh water, fresh beef, fresh fruit, and a quantity of onions. Two weeks later, we reached the Cape Verde Islands and again re-provisioned with fresh stores. At both ports, it was refreshing to see trees and plants again, as well as smell flowers and hear birdsong.

We slipped across the Equator and into the Southern Hemisphere on 27 August. The weather was now warming up as we headed into our first tropical zone. All aboard, like myself, who had never before crossed the famous Zero Latitude Line, were assembled for the traditional Navy initiation ceremony. We were dragged before daybreak from our hammocks and blindfolded, with our hands tied behind our backs, then hauled on deck under torchlight. Our blindfolds were removed, and we beheld the entire ship's company assembled around us as dawn broke. We were made to kneel before a long-haired, white bearded, crowned, and regally-robed King Neptune (suspiciously resembling one of our Senior Lieutenants, Robert Cooper), who sat in a chair 'throne' clutching a trident. Our bare chests and faces were then smeared with some kind of greasy, foul-odorous slime, and we were doused with bucket after bucket of seawater, while we were repeatedly required to swear undying allegiance to the God of the Sea. After the ordeal was over, those initiated were congratulated and cleaned up, and were given rousing cheers and applause. We were also granted a much-needed generous extra ration of grog, and toasted our sovereign, King George III. I was now reborn as a proud and official Jack Tar of the Royal Navy!

Life aboard ship by now had taken on a rhythm of its own. The regular tolling on the ship's brass bell of the hour and watch. The whooshing sound and splash of foaming salt waves as they struck our bow. The motion of the ship -- up and down, left and right -- became second nature when one moved about either above or below deck. The soft creaking of our stout oak masts and timbers. Some days were sunny, some were cloudy, some days were windy, and sometimes it rained. The color of the ocean changed often, depending on the weather. Sometimes, from aloft, the water color even appeared differently than from one's vantage on deck. The seas were smooth and regular at this point in our three-year voyage, with no rough storms. The crystal stars at night were incredible, as were the bright phases of the moon. I spent most of my duty hours up on the mizzen mast. Our sister ship, HMS Adventure, was always kept in sight. Occasionally, she would carefully heave to alongside us, and Captain Furneaux would converse by shouting through a brass megaphone with our Captain. One day, Cook agreed with Furneaux's request to sail ahead and meet by the end of October at Table Bay at the Cape of Good Hope. The Adventure was experiencing some minor leaking and its Captain wisely wanted to take no chances and get it attended to before it got worse. So soon, our companion ship melted over the southern horizon and disappeared.

On 3 September, 1772, the cry of "Sail off the port beam!" was heard. Captain Cook was alerted and was quickly on deck, extending his long glass and clasping it to his eye.

Seeing as we were currently not at war with the French -- the Seven Year's War having ended in our favor in 1763 -- Cook was not concerned that an international naval confrontation was imminent. But what he saw was disturbing.

Calling his six officers together, the Captain gravely announced, "She appears to be a French ship, but she is flying a black flag with a red skeleton. Gentlemen, that would be a pirate vessel. Master Gilbert..muster the armed Marines and have drummer hail all ship's company to battle stations! Helmsman, steer us on an intervening course."

Because every yard of canvas on Resolution was already hung, we rapidly approached the strange ship even as she tried to flee. As we got nearer, we saw she was somewhat smaller than us, but still in possession of several batteries of lethal cannon. Cook ordered a warning shot fired across her bow to indicate our intentions.

Midshipman Burney then cried out, "Captain! She's raising her gun ports and preparing to attack!"

Cook immediately ordered Lieutenant Clerke to have all of our twenty-four guns take aim and then fire at will. "Take her out, men! Try to hit the main mast!" Resolution shuttered in recoil as our cannons blasted, filling the air with smoke and the smell of spent gunpowder.

Our balls raked the enemy vessel's timbers with merciless ferocity -- so much so that they were unable to return fire. In just a few minutes, we knocked down their mainsails, thereby crippling her ability to maneuver. Midshipman Vancouver then announced that we had struck her below the water line, and that she listing starboard.

The Captain coolly surveyed the action through his long glass. "Cease fire, Master Gilbert. We got her, lads...well done...she's going down slow." He also remarked that he noticed many dead and wounded, and much blood and splintered destruction. "And there appears to be a large blackamoor in command, not wounded but seemingly giving orders."

I noticed then that the pirate's black flag with its red skeleton was being lowered, and was quickly replaced with the universal white flag of surrender.

"Lieutenant Cooper, lower both longboats and have our armed Marines board her and gather the survivors," the Captain commanded. "And be careful of any treachery."

An hour later our longboats returned, with seventeen souls -- some bleeding and rudely bandaged -- including a large African who was presumably the pirate captain. I later learned that the motley crew consisted of six Africans from the Barbary Coast, three Greeks, two Turks, a Maltese, a Corsican, and four Spaniards.

Cook called the large blackamoor to be brought to his cabin, escorted by a Marine. The rest of the pirates were humanely tended to and given food and water, then placed in irons in our ship's hold under armed guard.

"My name is Balthazar, " the pirate captain allowed in a deep bass voice when introduced to Captain Cook. He was taller than our Captain by a few inches, well-built , his coal black skin glistening and muscular under his loose leather vest. He sported a gold front tooth and a large silver earring in his right ear. He was probably in his late thirties. His only injury in the battle was a severed index finger on his left hand. He held it aloft, showing its stump and dried blood, and laughed. Cook called for our surgeon-officer, Isaac Smith, to clean the wound and bandage it while the two adversaries talked.

"So you are the famous James Cook? I have heard of you. You have just killed eighteen of my thirty-five crewmen, and have ruined my ship, Captain. But such is life, eh? Fighting, stealing, whoring, killing, and some day dying. Let me tell you about myself. I am from the Bassa tribe in West Africa. I was kidnapped and taken as a boy into slavery. I was worked, beaten, and abused by many Arab and Black masters. I eventually wound up in Rabat. There, I learned how to fight, steal, lie and cheat. I learned the rudiments of French, Spanish, and English. You see, I am a very clever man! I escaped from bondage over a dozen years ago after slitting my last master's throat, and later found myself working on a French merchant ship. I led a mutiny and we killed half of those on board. I became its new captain, and outfitted it with ten cannons in Tunis. Since then, we have sailed the sea lanes preying on anything afloat that we could defeat and loot. We did quite well, too, until now..."

Cook listened attentively, then rose from his chair and went to gaze out the array of six windows in his spacious rear cabin. After a few moments, he spoke.

"I assume you chose your name from the Bible, because, as you know, Balthazar was one of the Three Wise Men who paid homage to the Christ child. He was said to have been dark-skinned like yourself. But you have certainly not brought any gifts while engaging in your current foul occupation. You have brought only theft, misery, and death to innocent sailors and merchantmen. You are nothing but a cruel, dastardly outlaw in my eyes. Marine, take him below and shackle him like the others, until I decide our next course of action."

"But Captain, you surely must be a reasonable man," Balthazar insisted, now desperate, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I can make you a wealthy one too. If you set me and my men free anywhere ashore on the African coast, I can reveal the secret hiding place of my treasure chests on St. Matthew Island, and promise on my oath that you can have it all. Your Admiralty will never know. Gold, silver, pearls, jewels -- all yours. Just think about it and decide, James Cook."

The Captain merely replied without hesitation, clearly disgusted, "Take him below and lock him up, Marine. You are both dismissed."

Meanwhile, Balthazar's ship continued to flounder and slowly sink, so Cook ordered it re-boarded and relieved of any food or other useful stores. Then he ordered it set afire. I and the rest of Resolution's crew watched as it brightly burned, then broke up and sank.

Cook next called his six officers to his cabin. Around his large chart table, the Captain outlined his plans. "Gentlemen, we cannot afford to entertain these scoundrels until we reach Table Bay in two months. Nor will I take the chance of endangering our crew with this risky murderous rabble. Obviously, we cannot turn around and take them back for trial in England. So instead, I have decided to maroon them on Saxemberg Island, which is not too far out of our way as we sail south. The island was discovered in 1670 by a Dutchman named John Lindeman and named after his ship. It is fourteen miles long and about three miles wide. It has trees and birds, which means fresh water. It has a sandy beach and a peak in the center of the island. It has a 70' bluff on its northwest coast that extends eight miles or so. It is far enough away from the regular shipping lanes that few if any ever visit there. We will deposit our prisoners there with the food and other stores we salvaged from their ship. We will then return to Saxemberg Island after we circumnavigate the globe and complete our voyage and are heading home. There, we will collect any survivors and take them back with us to England for trial and either imprisonment or hanging. Questions, gentlemen?"

The officers agreed, so Cook rearranged his charts and showed the men where they would be going. "Master Gilbert, have the helmsman set a course southwest to our new goal: Latitude 30 degrees 18 minutes South and Longitude 28 degrees 20 minutes West. Midshipman Burney, inform the crew of our intentions, and also provide all men with an extra tot of grog with my compliments for a job well done. That is all. Thank you, gentlemen."

A week later, tiny Saxemberg Island came into view. It was easy to see how any passing ships could miss it, which was as the Captain had intended.

Balthazar and his men were loaded with their stores in our two longboats, and taken ashore. "I will be back in about two years, so make the best of your situation until then," Cook proclaimed in a loud, clear voice on the island's desolate beach. "You all deserved this punishment by your own illegal and nefarious actions, so whether you live or die is strictly your concern, not mine. May God have mercy on your souls."

But Balthazar simply stared at Cook with smoldering hatred in his dark eyes, and replied, "If I survive this ordeal, James Cook, I swear I will hunt you down someday and kill you." That said, the pirate captain then spat in the sand, turned, and led his sorry band with their scant supplies inland.

HMS Resolution rendezvoused with HMS Adventure as planned at Table Bay at the southern tip of Africa on October 30, 1772. The harbor was a huge forest of masts flying many different flags, because the Cape of Good Hope was the main provisional area for ships traveling to or from Asia. Our crew had thus far enjoyed good luck and fine health, and we were thus afforded ten days shore leave after restocking our vessel. Letters were posted and collected. Of course, most men went straight to the town's many taverns and brothels, to spend some of the advanced money on their final wages that Cook had provided. Gambling and brawling were also popular sailor pastimes.

Both of our expedition's ships left the Bay on 22 November. A botanist from Sweden, Anders Sparrman, had by now joined the Resolution's crew, as we headed south towards the Antarctic Circle in our quest to find the Great Southern Continent and its presumed untapped natural resources. The weather had turned severely cold, so we were issued with our warm Naval fearnaught jackets and trousers.

On 17 January, we finally crossed the Antarctic Circle, but thick pack ice soon impeded our southern progress, and we had to tack eastward instead, looking for an opening. The bleak and frigid scene sent shutters down our spines, and not just from the icy cold. I saw my first icebergs, magnificent yet frightful in their imposing silence, massive mountains of solid white and blue ice. I heard that Cook himself had uttered, "It is an awful place, fit for neither man or beast. To be stuck here is a death sentence." We could see no landscape beyond, so there was no coastline yet to chart.

On 8 February, our two ships were separated, due to dense ice fog. Prior, if they ever lost the other, the Captains had agreed to meet at Queen Charlotte Sound in New Zealand, which Cook had discovered and mapped during his first voyage on HMS Endeavour in 1770. Meanwhile, Cook continued to search with Resolution for Terra Australis, but to no avail. Our ships were finally reunited -- in blessed warmer weather, as we headed north -- on 17 May.

We spent the next months exploring the islands of the South Pacific, especially Tahiti, where the crew (beginning on 15 August) enjoyed the tropical sun and fresh fruit and the loving carnal hospitality of the naked, brown-skinned women. It was indeed like a dream, a paradise! We also swam in the warm waters, feasted, fished, and dozed under wavy coconut palm trees in our off-duty hours. It was here that I, at last, got my tattoos -- a dark blue braided chain around my neck with a single star in the middle near the base of my throat. But 'all good things must come to an end,' as is said, and we reluctantly left our Tahitian friends after just a few weeks.

On 22 October, our companion vessels became separated again by a storm off of the isle of Tonga, only they never reunited at Queen Charlotte Sound as before. This, I later learned, was because Captain Furneaux lost some of his men in an attack by hostile native Maori on the North Island of New Zealand and decided it was then best to return to England. (HMS Adventure did arrive safely home on 14 July, 1774.) Our ship, however, sailed south again past the freezing Antarctic Circle, for our Captain was determined to find the missing continent many believed was there, somewhere.

Our furthest southerly penetration occurred on 30 January, 1774, when we reached Latitude 71 degrees 10 minutes South. We were blocked there by a solid sea of ice. Even Cook knew that the quest ordered by the Admiralty was over. There was simply no evidence of a mythical Great South Continent -- there was just endless ice as far as the eye could see. When the Captain informed the crew of this fact, and told us we were headed north again, back to warmer climes, every sailor was relieved! Thus we visited several islands in the eastern South Pacific for several months before heading for the Straits of Magellan, arriving there on 17 December. We spent a festive Christmas in a sheltered bay on the western side of Tierra del Fuego. Rounding Cape Horn later, however, was terrible -- with devilish winds, monstrous waves and lashing rains. All Topmen, like myself, truly earned our salt during those dangerous days-- being aloft a hundred feet above deck -- as the ship bucked, weaved, and dipped in the maritime maelstrom as we raised or lowered sail, trying not to fall while grasping slippery rigging. Cook praised us individually for our courage and our professionalism once we made it safely to calmer waters on the Atlantic side. As we proceeded, the Captain also later discovered a new island which he named South Georgia. It was rocky and desolate, save for large colonies of seals and sea birds.

We reached Table Bay again on 21 March, 1775. But over time and through our sailing ordeals, our rigging was quite badly worn and needed replacement , so we were forced to replace it rather than risk going straight home to England. The work took five weeks. When we left the Cape at last, Cook announced that we would briefly stop at Saxemberg Island and collect Balthazar and his pirate party, should any of them still be alive.

When we arrived at that remote land, the Captain ordered a single cannon fired to inform the inhabitants. Then, with Resolution's armed Marines in two longboats, he went ashore.

What they found was a ragged, abandoned interior encampment filled with grisly scattered skeletons still clad with rotting bits of clothing, leather, and metal. Cook carefully counted the number of skulls, which totaled fifteen. This left two corpses unaccounted for. "Maybe they resorted to cannibalism in their final desperation and buried the bones in shame afterwards," the Captain mused. "It is not unusual under such circumstances. However, they did have fishing tackle and nets, and a source of fresh water, so they could have survived -- with enough discipline, that is." Cook then ordered the boney hands of all skeletons to be examined. He was looking for one particular hand which was missing an index finger. After a few minutes, a Marine found and presented said hand to his Captain. "Well, Balthazar, it seems you have gone to Hell where you belong," Cook muttered, tossing the large blanched claw to the ground."Let's go, men. Our business is done here."

Our final stops on our way home were at St. Helena and Fernando de Noronha. We arrived safely at last at Spithead, Portsmouth on 30 July, 1775. England! Although I sailed on other ships for many years until the humility of old age set in, none could compare with my proud time sailing with Captain James Cook on HMS Resolution. We had an adventure and had circumnavigated the globe! It was easily the highlight of my life, and my several grandchildren never seem to tire of my retelling the many true tales of that historic voyage.

Cook himself always claimed that Resolution was his favorite ship -- so much so that he used her again on his third major voyage of discovery. Unfortunately, the Captain was killed by Hawaiian natives on 14 February, 1779 at Kealakekua Bay. He was only fifty years old. I'll never forget the great man...

And as for Balthazar's promise of buried pirate treasure on St. Matthew Island...who can say?

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

November 26, 2019