

# What would survivors of the Laperouse shipwrecks have done?

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Laperouse and his two ships, *Astrolabe* and *Boussole*, arrived in Botany Bay on 24 January 1788, just days after ships of the First Fleet. They sailed away on 10 March 1788. They were never heard from again. It was a great mystery.

## **Murray Island**

Dr Garrick Hitchcock gave a presentation to the Friends in April 2018.

“The Final Fate of the La Perouse Expedition: Wrecked in Torres Strait?”

I was intrigued by the topic. However, I was unable to attend as I was involved that day with celebrations for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of my great-great-great-grandfather, my first ancestor to arrive in Australia in 1818. I contacted Dr Hitchcock, and he kindly sent me a copy of the paper he wrote.

By a strange coincidence his talk that day was also about an event in 1818. He has studied Murray Island, known to the inhabitants as Mer. This island is on the Pacific side of the Torres Strait. An English ship sailing from Sydney to India landed at Mer, and saw that there was an Indian seaman living there with the locals. He had been there four years, and had learnt the local language. There was a story that several decades earlier, a foreign ship had arrived on the island, and most of its crew had been killed. This incident was reported in various newspapers at the time, particularly those in Sydney and in India. There was speculation that the ship may have been part of the Laperouse expedition.

## **Vanikoro**

Laperouse’s two ships had actually both been sunk on the reefs surrounding the island of Vanikoro, an island in the Solomon Islands. Both ships were wrecked quite close to each other. Almost certainly they must have been caught up in a very severe storm or cyclone. An Irish adventurer, Peter Dillon, found evidence of this in 1827. Dillon reported that the inhabitants told him that the survivors sailed away about five months later.

## **Dumont D’Urville**

In early 1828 the French navigator, Dumont D’Urville, left Hobart. His intention was to sail to Vanikoro, and from there to Murray Island. He and his crew were quite debilitated by the time they reached Vanikoro. He was told by the inhabitants that the survivors had built a

two-masted ship and sailed away about 5 to 7 months after arriving. He assumed that any Laperouse survivors would also be very weakened, so could not have gone very far, and so he did not bother going to Murray Island.

With the discovery of the ships wrecked at Vanikoro, the Murray / Mer speculation was overwhelmed, particularly after Dumont D'Urville's reaction. Over the years there had been only very occasional footnotes about this, until Dr Hitchcock's discovery. I personally had been quite unaware of these reports.

The immediate question to me was how did some of the Laperouse crew get from Vanikoro to Mer?

### **What options were available?**

I first phrase it in general terms. If someone was marooned on a Pacific Island in this period (say 1780 to 1800), what could they do? Three basic options.

1. Stay there. Either wait for someone to rescue, or enjoy island life by marrying a local lady.
2. Use a small boat. This could be a longboat or other boat salvaged from the ship. It could be a canoe of the islanders.
3. Build a ship using whatever could be salvaged from the shipwreck, plus the plentiful supply of timber on the island. Then sail off to some European colony.

The number of survivors would determine which options were available. Option 2 might require a minimum of maybe five. Option 3 would require a greater minimum number of men. Who knows whether that would be 20 or 50?

Laperouse's two ships were wrecked on the reef, about a mile from the shore. We know that there was some loss of life. Some could have been fatally injured in the shipwreck, others may have drowned. Upon arrival on the island, there may have been others killed in confrontations with the locals, as happened in Samoa in Laperouse's voyage. Even so, a substantial proportion of those on board must have got ashore. Quite likely between 50 and 80 men, though this is a pure guess. We do not know whether Laperouse himself survived.

### **William Bligh. Mutiny of the Bounty**

This is an example of using a longboat to reach a European settlement.

In 1789 Bligh and his crew were in Tahiti for months, studying the viability of using breadfruit. Many men on the crew formed liaisons with local Polynesian women. Lieutenant Bligh insisted that the ship should leave the island. This resulted in the famous mutiny.

The mutineers put Bligh and those loyal to him in a longboat. It was known that there were inhabited islands a few days away, so they were only given supplies for a few days. Bligh landed on an island. The natives attacked, and one of Bligh's men was killed. Bligh then decided that the only hope was to row the boat to get to the Dutch settlement of Kupang on Timor. This was 3500 nautical miles away, and required a route through the Torres Strait. With strict rationing, they all reached Kupang in about 5 weeks. However they were so weakened that several died shortly after landing.

### **The Antelope**

This is an example of constructing a ship and sailing to a European settlement.

The *Antelope*, was a ship of the Honourable East India Company. It was commanded by Captain Henry Wilson. It had 32 Europeans and 16 Chinese on board, when it left Macao on 21 July 1783. It was destroyed on 9 August 1783, on the reef of an island.

My reference is a book by George Keate, "*An account of the Pelew Islands*", published in London in 1788. It was based on the journal and communications with his friend, Captain Wilson. It has xxvii plus 378 pages. There are quite a few illustrations. There are extensive descriptions of the islands, and its people, and even a small vocabulary of the island's language.

The book calls the islands the Pelews (or the Palos). This island is part of a chain of small islands stretching from 5 to 9 degrees North, and 130 to 136 degrees east of Greenwich. Looking at a contemporary atlas these are the Palau islands, east of Mindanao. The book has a detailed map, showing the location.

There was no loss of life, and all managed to get ashore. By good fortune, on board the *Antelope* was a translator, a Portuguese man, Tom Rose. He tried speaking with the natives. Rose had some knowledge of Malay. Lo and behold on the island was a Malay man who had been there for about a year. This man had come from the East Indies, and he knew some Dutch and a few words of English. Relations between the natives and the crew were very good, partly because of their ability to communicate.

Upon finding they were safe, Wilson and his men, soon began their task of building a new vessel. They were able to use some materials from the *Antelope*, but they were also able to use local material such as timber. They erected a palisade around the construction site.

They set sail on 12 November 1783, just three months after arriving. One of the crew decided to remain on the island, as he had found a wife. Lee Boo, the son of the King of the island, sailed away on the new ship, called the *Oroolong*. They arrived in Macao on 30 November 1783. Surprisingly their journey to Macau took only 18 days, less than the 19 days of the ill-fated voyage of the *Antelope* from Macao.

They went from this Portuguese colony to nearby Canton, which had a greater population of English people. The crew sailed on different ships to England. Captain Wilson and Lee Boo sailed on the *Morse*, which reached Portsmouth on 14 July 1784. Lee Boo enjoyed his stay in England, until he died suddenly on 27 December 1784. Keate, the author, also had a lot of interaction with Lee Boo.

I did a Google search on the *Antelope*. I found that there had been many editions of Keate's book. My copy is the first edition and was published on 12 June 1788, which coincidentally would have been about the time that Laperouse's ships were wrecked. It was translated to other languages: French, Spanish, German and Russian.

### **Would Laperouse have known about the Antelope?**

The book describes an incident that happened within five years of Laperouse's shipwreck. It happened on a Pacific Ocean island surrounded by a reef.

I conjecture that it is very likely that Laperouse and his men knew about the *Antelope*, and the successful outcome. There would have been considerable public interest in England when the ship's captain and crew returned to England in the middle of 1784. France and England had been at peace since 1783. France was gathering information about the Pacific in preparation for Laperouse's voyage.

Laperouse left France in mid-1785, a year after the *Antelope's* crew had returned to England. Also he had spent some considerable time in Macao. If he and his crew, had

known about the *Antelope*, it is very likely that the survivors would have followed a similar strategy, when they found themselves in the same predicament.

The French translation was published in Paris in 1788, the same year that Keate's book was first published in England. The French edition lists the authors as George Keate, and also Honoré-Gabriel de Riquetti, the comte de Mirabeau. Mirabeau was a major figure in French politics at this time, and was working closely with Fleurieu, one of the major planners of Laperouse's voyage.

### **Where would Laperouse's men go to?**

I can think of three options to get to a European settlement.

1. The original intention was documented in Laperouse's journal, given to English in Botany Bay. They would explore some Pacific islands, then sail through Torres Strait eventually to Mauritius (Ile-de-France) in the Indian Ocean. By sailing through the Torres Strait, they could also stop at the Dutch settlements of Kupang or Batavia.
2. Laperouse had stayed six weeks in Manila. To go to Manila would require some dangerous navigation. It was further. In the shipwreck they may have lost all their detailed maps, and sophisticated navigational equipment.
3. Go back to Botany Bay / Port Jackson. This was a long journey. They knew the danger of reefs on the Queensland coast, which severely damaged the *Endeavour* on Cook's 1770 voyage. It was a fledgling colony, with very few resources.

I think Option 1 was by far the most attractive.

Dr Hitchcock's research is totally consistent with this scenario, except that the French had the misfortune to have another shipwreck on Murray Island, which logically would have been on their likely route.