

Circumstantial response to “Who shot *Bounty* mast with this small lead ball?”

By Dr. Donald Patrick Albert

Introduction

Recently a lead musket ball extracted from HMAV *Bounty*'s mainmast arrived at the Pitcairn Islands Study Center in Angwin, California (*Figure 1*). The Center's long-standing director, Herb Ford, wrote about this intriguing *Bounty* artifact in the January 2022 issue of *The Pitcairn Log*.

Herein, he recognized Warrant Officer (retired) David Goldie's donation of a lead ball recovered during a 2003 diving expedition with the British Royal Navy to Bounty Bay, Pitcairn Island (25° 4'S, 130° 6'W). Ford wrote that this “battered, half-inch size lead ball” is perhaps the “most intriguing gift” received by the Pitcairn Islands Study Center. From Goldie's Bounty Bay dive we know little remains of *Bounty* wreckage except mainmast pieces and some lead ballast. He used a diver's

knife to extract a “lead shot from the mast.” Goldie said his experience under Bounty Bay was akin to “diving into a washing machine” (Ford 2022).

The purpose of this study is to tackle the questions Ford included in the title of his article, “Who shot *Bounty* mast with this small lead ball? Why? When? Where?” Understanding that definitive answers might be elusive, the idea is to identify plausible scenarios that could explain a projectile striking the *Bounty* mainmast. Ford's four questions will be explored using supporting “evidence” from primary and secondary sources. The time frame spans from December 23, 1787, to January 23, 1790, or just over three years. The author will evaluate selected situations for plausibility using “Yes or No.” The author will engage a strategy using circumstantial evidence; therefore, this narrative falls within the range of studies labeled as academic, hypothetical, or speculative.

This particular artifact is important because as Ian Ball observed, “unhappily... these scraps from Pitcairn's past have largely disappeared from the island” (Ball, 1973, p. 15). Fortunate then is Ted Cookson's compilation of the location of *Bounty* artifacts scattered in institutions, churches, museums, and libraries worldwide (Cookson, 2012). Ted's entry for the Pitcairn Island Museum lists ballasts, cannon, cannon balls, swivel gun, musket balls, copper jug, copper sheathing, lead pipe fragments, glass fragments, and more (*Figure 2*). Cookson's



Figure 1

The lead musket ball gifted by Warrant Office David Goldie to the Pitcairn Islands Study Center, Pacific Union College. (Used with permission of Herb Ford.)

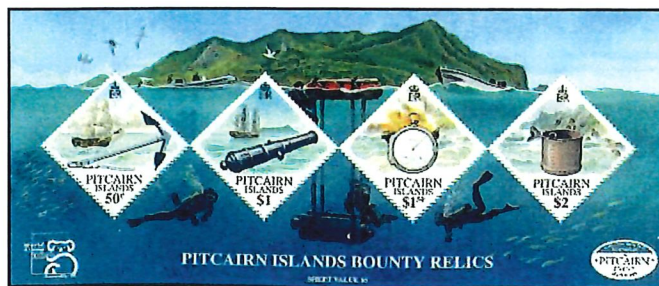


Figure 2

*“Pitcairn Islands Bounty Relics” sheetlet released March 19, 1999, showing an image of a salvaged HMAV *Bounty* cannon and other relics.*

inventory is a work in progress that links his opportunities to travel with a lifelong interest in the myriad threads of the Bounty Saga.

Background

His Majesty's Armed Vessel (H.M.A.V.) *Bounty* began as "a coastal trading ship" under the name *Bethia* (Ball, 1973, p. 13). It was built in 1784 in Hull, England, and purchased and retrofitted in 1787 for Lieutenant William Bligh's (first) breadfruit expedition to the South Seas. The *Bounty* measured 90 feet 10 inches in length, with width of 24 feet 4 inches, and draft of 11 feet 4 inches. *Bounty's* three masts (fore, main, and mizzen) ranged from 48 to 59 feet, the largest being the mainmast (Wahlroos, 1989). The focus here is on a mainmast section lying on the bottom of Bounty Bay. Mainmast sections exposed above the upper deck were more likely to receive an errant musket shot than portions between decks, although not impossible.

Bounty's mission involved obtaining breadfruit saplings from Tahiti (17°40'S, 149°25'W) in the "Society Islands" (French Polynesia) and to deliver these to the Caribbean. Joseph Banks, the renowned botanist and aristocrat, advocated that breadfruit could constitute an inexpensive food source for African slaves working the British plantations in Jamaica.

From December 23, 1787, until April 27, 1789, Lieutenant Bligh sailed from England to Tahiti, secured the requisite breadfruit saplings, and had begun his return route to England via the Cape of Good Hope and Jamaica. The next morning (April 28, 1789), Acting Lieutenant Fletcher Christian and his supporters deposed their foul-mouth commander and 18 loyalists to the *Bounty's* largest and most seaworthy service boat, a 23-foot launch. The mutiny occurred within sight of an erupting volcano on Tofua (19°45'S, 175°04'W) in the "Friendly Islands" (Tonga). With the weight of 19 men and onboard supplies, just seven or eight inches separated the launch's gunwale from the undulating ocean swell; these men faced almost certain death. Unbeknownst to Christian, the intrepid Bligh would successfully navigate this vessel 3,600 miles (5,795 km) to Coupang, Timor (10°10'S, 123°36'E). After returning to England, William Bligh continued his service with the Admiralty, including a successful two-year long second breadfruit expedition from

1791 to 1793.

While Christian masterminded a bloodless coup, the aftermath of the mutiny left a trail of death by disease, drowning, murder, suicide, and even hanging. See Sven Wahlroos' (1989) *Mutiny and the Romance in the South Seas* for a chronological and encyclopedic rendering of the Bounty Saga. Another excellent account, among dozens, is Glynn Christian's (2021), *The Truth about the Mutiny on HMAV Bounty and the Fate of Fletcher Christian*.

After the mutiny, Fletcher Christian navigated the *Bounty* eastward 1,660 miles (2,670 km) from Tofua to Tubuai (23°22'S, 149°28'W) in the Austral Islands (French Polynesia). The mutineers sailed 400 miles (645 km) to Matavia Bay, Tahiti (17°40'S, 149°25'W), to trade for livestock and entice women, before returning to Tubuai. Here Christian attempted a settlement, Fort George, near the shore of the reef-enclosed island. After almost three months (June 23, 1789 to September 17, 1789), he aborted Tubuai because of hostilities with the locals. Christian deposited 16 crew members on the shores of Matavia Bay on September 22, 1789 and left the next day. *Bounty* circuitously sailed the South Pacific before deciding on Pitcairn Island on January 15, 1790 (Albert, 2018, 2021a). The ship's 7,750 mile (12,790 km) post-mutiny track across the South Pacific is available in Google Earth for interested readers (see Albert, 2021b).

Who, Why, When, Where Shooting Drills

Since there were no marines to secure the ship, able-bodied seamen had to bear arms on occasion. It is possible that an errant musket ball could have hit a mast, especially if these drills occurred onboard. I suspect that drills would occur along stretches of shore or grassy field, or if afloat into the "vastness" of the ocean (Fitzsimons, 2019, p. 208). In the days just prior to the mutiny (April 25-26, 1789), the *Bounty* was passing through the "Friendly Islands," Ha'apai District, Tonga (20°0'S 174°40'W). While trading with natives, an anchor went missing. Armed seamen scattered the natives overboard to their canoes, and at least two chiefs were detained as ransom for the pilfered anchor.

Bligh had the chiefs peel coconuts below deck while under armed guard – a total insult. The captain released the prisoners when no anchor mate-

rialized. According to McKee, the seamen awkwardly handled the muskets because it had been “months since Bligh had last given them arms drill” (McKee, 1962, p. 81). This is difficult to explain given that “Bligh’s log shows that Christian was to oversee small-arms practice on a daily basis, something not mentioned once on the outward voyage” (Christian, 2021, p. 41).

Either Fletcher was emotionally exhausted or physically overwhelmed by more important ship tasks to fulfill this obligation. Perhaps Bligh was also distracted and failed to ensure that drills occurred. The shooting drill theory offers two points toward this investigation. If Bligh’s crew were unaccustomed to regular musket practice, it is possible that if shots were fired, the chance of hitting wayward objects (*i.e.*, mainmast) substantially increased. However, since neither Bligh nor James Morrison, the erudite boatswain’s mate, ever mentioned a single musket discharge during this period in their respective accounts, this scenario doesn’t seem possible.

During Mutiny

Christian’s first task required he get the keys to open the arms chests which were “guarded” by two sleeping midshipmen (Hallett and Haywood). The keys would normally be in the safekeeping of the *Bounty*’s master, John Fryer. He had relinquished the keys to Joseph Coleman (armorer), because Fryer did not want his repose interrupted by a musket request to shoot a bird or shark (Kennedy, 1978). Sounds reasonable, unless one remembers that Coleman had deserted at Tahiti and was flogged as punishment. Perhaps Fryer ought to have entrusted the keys with someone more reliable, besides, a master “was supposed to keep the keys” (Kennedy, 1978, p. 106).

The mutiny starts when Fletcher requested the keys from Coleman and chased off Hallett for sleeping on duty; Haywood had moved on to look at a shark following the ship so his immediate presence was no longer an issue (Kennedy, 1978, p. 107).

With the arms chests unlocked, weapons, including cutlasses, pistols, and muskets with fixed bayonets, were handed to Charles Churchill (master-at-arms), John Mills (gunner’s mate), Robert Lamb (mutineer turned loyalist), Matthew Quintal, Isaac Martin, William McCoy, William Muspratt, Thom-

as Burkett, John Sumner, John Adams, Henry Hillbrant, Matthew Thomson, Thomas Ellison, John Williams and perhaps others (Wahlroos, 1989, Kennedy, 1978). One interesting side note to consider is all 10 individuals who had received whippings were among the mutineers (Wahlroos, 1989, p. 273-274).

According to Bligh, four men -- Christian with a cutlass, and Churchill, Mills, and Burkett with muskets and bayonets -- entered his cabin and scuttled him to the upper deck (McKinney, 1989, p. 71). Quintal and Sumner guarded Fryer and said that no one would hurt him if he remained quiet (Hough, 1973, p. 23). Christian, however, threatened to blow Bligh’s brains out, along with other murderous exclamations (Hough, 1973, p. 27).

Later, Isaac Martin showed compassion as he fed a shaddock (grapefruit-like fruit) to Bligh; this vacillating commitment to the mutiny caught Christian’s attention. Soon afterward, Mills and Burkett edged nearer to Bligh with muskets cocked. With high tension and a strong presence of muskets, William Bligh and 18 loyalists were set adrift in the *Bounty*’s largest and most sea-worthy service boat -- the launch. The mutiny was over. Since no shots occurred, the musket lead ball salvaged by Goldie is not from the mutiny. Had there been muskets fired during the mutiny, this would have surfaced either in Bligh’s log and narrative, court martial proceedings, or later with the publication of James Morrison’s journal (Morrison, 2010). Compiling this list of armed mutineers made me realize how much support Christian was able to muster in such a short time. There would have been little chance for the loyalists to stop this mutiny, even if they wanted.

Tubuai – First Skirmish

One month later and 1,550+ miles (2,500+ km) eastward, *Bounty* visits Tubuai (23°22’S, 149°28’W) from May 28-31, 1789. This island is about 400 miles (645 km) south of Tahiti where Christian hoped to establish a hideaway. This high island, enclosed by a fringing reef, had been “discovered” in 1777 by Captain James Cook; however, no landing occurred because of the difficulty of navigating its reef strewn lagoon. This made for a potential safe haven from British ships should one approach the island. The natives were not excited about the arrival of uninvited guests.

During the following several days, the mutineers

considered their options while the natives attempted to thwart a landing. One attempt involved 18 alluring women, along with five men, who boarded the ship from a double canoe. This was a decoy designed to distract the mutineers from some 50 canoes, each with 15 to 20 men armed with rocks and spears.

With the five men on board pilfering anything in sight, the mutineers brandished arms to force them back off. Christian ordered a “ragged cannonade of pistol and musket shot” (Nicolson, 1967, p. 17), directed four-pounders loaded with grapeshot and fired at “point-blank range... straight down into the canoes,” (Hough, 1973, p. 195) and lowered his service boats to pursue the natives paddling back to shore through the sound and smoke of musket shots (McKinney, 1989, p. 116). With such a violent first encounter with the mutineers, Christian’s name for this place was unfortunately quite apropos, “Bloody Bay.” There were about a dozen Tubuaians killed, including one woman, and many others wounded during this first skirmish (Hough, 1973, p. 195). This event might explain an errant musket ball striking *Bounty*’s mainmast.

Return to Matavia Bay, Tahiti

In spite of their poor reception, Christian decided to settle Tubuai. First, the *Bounty* returned to Matavia Bay to secure “stock and women” as Adams is purported to have said. The dates encompassing the trip back and forth between Tubuai to Tahiti were May 31 to June 23, 1789. According to Morrison’s eyewitness account, there were two instances of musket shots originating on *Bounty* while in Matavia Bay. On June 10, 1789, William McCoy “fired upon a number of the native who thronged the Gangway,” and four days later, Churchill, hailing and receiving no answer, fired at an approaching canoe (Smith & Thomas, 2013, p. 61).

There were no casualties in either case, but of the two events, McCoy’s firing had the greatest chance of striking the *Bounty*. This depends, however, on the juxtaposition of the shooter, mainmast, and gangway, which we may never know; however, this event presents a plausible or reasonable answer. Since Churchill was shooting off the ship at an incoming canoe, it is unlikely that he would have hit the mainmast.

McCoy’s history both pre- and post-*Bounty* in-

cludes instances of impulsive judgment. Scars on his abdomen and under his chin were evidence of previous wounds, perhaps via knife fights with beligerent seamen (Lareau, 1999, p. 6). McCoy was one of the armed mutineers during Christian’s revolt. Both pre- and post-*Bounty* there are accounts of his cruelty towards the Polynesians (Silverman, 1967, p. 65). That McCoy became a distiller of alcohol while on Pitcairn Island exacerbated familial and social tensions, and his own alcoholism contributed to his madness and suicide (by jumping off a cliff). There is evidence, therefore, that William McCoy was a passionate individual prone to careless actions (Christian, 2021). While it is speculation to claim his musket shot hit the mainmast during the shooting at the gangway, it is plausible.

Tubuai – Second Skirmish

The *Bounty* returned to Bloody Bay on June 23, 1789 (Albert, 2021b). Christian and the mutineers began to construct a fortified settlement dubbed Fort George. However, their interactions with the locals suffered for different reasons, and the mutineers’ departure was bloody once again. In this second skirmish, the Tubuaians suffered heavy losses with estimates of 60 men and six women killed, including numerous wounded. In contrast, the mutineers sustained no deaths, and just a couple wounded, including Thomas Burkett (Albert, 2021a).

After a short time, the mutineers decided to move on with 16 electing to return to Tahiti, and the remainder casting their allegiance with Christian. These nine mutineers eventually found their way to Pitcairn Island. This event does not offer a plausible explanation for Goldie’s lead ball; this land-based skirmish placed the *Bounty* out of direct line of fire.

Shooting Seabirds and Sharks

Fletcher Christian, acting lieutenant, requested the keys from Coleman under the pretext of shooting a shark swimming alongside the vessel. It appears seamen were interested in supplementing rations with seabirds like boobies, noddies, and albatrosses, and as mentioned, sharks. If birds were targets, one would expect a firing trajectory overhead or askance so that the birds dropped on deck or close enough to scoop up from the sea. However, if the shooter missed his target, the mainmast might have intercepted a lead musket ball. Shooting at

birds or sharks for sport or food would probably not have reached the level of significance for Bligh to record, but could have occurred, nevertheless.

Shooting Jacket-Wearing Native off Gunwale

On passing Purutea (Mangaia, Cook Islands, 21°55'S, 157°57'W), canoes came alongside the *Bounty*. One or two men boarded the vessel to trade hogs and coconuts. One of the Tahitian women traveling with the mutineers, "Jenny," remembered how "(O)ne of the natives ... was much delighted at beholding the pearl buttons on the jacket of Captain Christian, who, in a very friendly manner, gave the man the jacket" (Hough, 1973, p. 206).

While standing on the gunwale showing off his new attire, the sound of a single shot ended his excitement, and in the next second, the native toppled overboard. Hough rationalized that a mutineer jumped "to the conclusion that the fellow had stolen the garment" and the shooting was "clearly a mistake" (Hough, 1973, p. 207). It is unknown, excluding Christian, which mutineer pulled the trigger; there was bound to be eyewitnesses.

Peter Fitzsimons' guess is John Adams, alias Alec Smith, the long-standing patriarch of Pitcairn Island (Fitzsimons, 2018). Being the lone surviving mutineer since 1800, all male eyewitnesses were long dead before first contact with the outside world in 1808. Adams had no one to correct his conflicting accounts of the mutiny and its aftermath; therefore, had he shot the native, mum's the word. John Adams never volunteered, confessed, nor was confronted about this shooting. While at least one of the Polynesian women, probably more, was an eyewitness to this tragic shooting, Jenny never named the villain (Maude, 1958). Speaking with a mixture of Tahitian and English, the early visitors to Pitcairn failed to record the women's voices.

Whoever shot the native at Purutea, it was either an accident or cold-blooded murder. Since history records just one musket shot here, it is not reasonable to conclude that this lead ball originated with this incident. However, there were numerous instances throughout *Bounty's* sojourn, both pre- and post-mutiny, of natives scrambling onboard. According to Morrison, Bligh enjoyed firing off an assortment of weapons to impress visiting natives (Grant, 1997). Might warning shots, missed targets, or shots designed to impress inadvertently hit the

mainmast, perhaps?

Flaming *Bounty* and Parting Shot

After about a week of arriving at Pitcairn (January 23, 1790), the *Bounty* was set ablaze after being cannibalized for supplies and lumber. One might picture a mutineer(s) firing musket rounds into the burning bulk to release emotions that must have accumulated over eight months of wandering the South Seas. While there is no proof that this happened, it is in the realm of possibility. This is assuming the mainmast submerged into Bounty Bay before the flames melted the lead musket ball. This scenario envisages mutineers taking a proverbial parting shot, one final insult inflicted on Bligh and *Bounty*. There is no evidence this happened, it is just the author's speculation.

Conclusion

This investigation explored the possible origin of a lead musket ball recently donated by Warrant Officer Goldie to the Pitcairn Islands Study Center. This artifact came from a mainmast section of *Bounty*

Who?	Why?	When?	Where?	Plausible?
Crewmembers (Original)	Shooting drills	December 23, 1787 – April 27, 1789	England to Tofua Special reference to Annamooka (Nomuka, Tonga) 20°0'S, 174°40'W	No
Mutineers	Bloodless coup, no shots fired although threats to do so	April 28, 1789	Offshore Tofua (Tonga) 19°45'S, 175°04'W	No
Mutineers	First skirmish with Tubuaians	May 28, 1789 to May 31, 1789	Bloody Bay, Tubuai (Austral Islands, French Polynesia) 23°22'S, 149°28'W	Yes
William McCoy	Shot fired to disperse Tahitians standing on <i>Bounty's</i> gangway	Between June 6-18, 1789	Matavia Bay, Tahiti (Society Islands, French Polynesia) 17°40'S, 149°25'W	Yes
Mutineers	Second skirmish with Tubuaians	June 23, 1789-September 17, 1789	Tubuai (Austral Islands, French Polynesia) 23°22'S, 149°28'W	No
Crewmembers/ Mutineers	Shooting at seabirds or sharks	December 23, 1787 – January 23, 1790	Spithead (Strait), England 50°45'N, 1°08'W to Pitcairn Island 25°4'S, 130°6'W	Yes
Mutineers	Shooting jacket-wearing native off gunwale	After leaving Moorea (northwest of Tahiti) on September 23, 1789	Purutea (Mangaia, Cook Islands) 21°55'S, 157°57'W	No
Mutineers	Parting shot	January 23, 1790	Pitcairn Island 25°4'S, 130°6'W	No/Yes Speculative

Table 1: Who, Why, When, Where, and Plausibility (Yes/No) surrounding Goldie's lead musket ball extracted from a section of mainmast found in wreckage of HMAV *Bounty*.