Mutiny on the *Bounty*

The Mutiny on the *Bounty* is a story you've probably heard of before. The tale has been told and retold, thousands of times in print and in at least five movies. The details of these versions are not necessarily true, as writers and directors have taken lots of liberties filling in the gaps about the parts that know one will ever know about.

What is a mutiny and why does the story of *this* mutiny fascinate us so much?

A shipboard mutiny was a revolt against the commanding officers by the crew to pursue some change in their situation. It wasn't always a crew violently taking over a ship and sailing away, sometimes it was more of an organized strike to demand pay increases and better living conditions. In the 18th century, a mutiny onboard a naval ship was a crime punishable by death.

In 1787, the British Royal Navy sent HMAV *Bounty* (for "Her/His Majesty's Armed Vessel"), under the command of Lt. William Bligh, to the South Pacific to collect breadfruit saplings. The plants were to be taken to Britain's Caribbean colonies for use as a source of food for slaves.

The *Bounty* took ten months to get to Tahiti and had to sail through some very difficult weather along the way. Once they got to Tahiti, Captain Bligh let many of the crew live ashore to gather and take care of the breadfruit plants. Life ashore must have been much nicer than it had been on the ship. No storms at sea, fresh food, more freedom to do as they pleased, and the company of the local Tahitians must have made many of them want to stay there forever. After a five months ashore, many of the sailors had girlfriends on the island, and at least one of the men, Fletcher Christian, *Bounty*'s Master's Mate, married a Tahitian woman.

Then it was time to go.

Just a few weeks into their return voyage, Fletcher Christian and about a third of the crew forcibly took command of the ship from Captain Bligh. For the sailors to side with Christian meant that they were choosing to become criminals and that they'd never go home again. The mutineers put Bligh and the men loyal to him

into a small boat and cast them off. The boat couldn't fit all the men that wanted to go, so several of them had to stay with the mutineers.

As the *Bounty* sailed away, Bligh and 18 men headed west in the open sea. Remarkably, with neither a chart nor a compass, Bligh sailed the overcrowded boat more than 3,600 miles to safety at the island of Timor, using just a sextant and a pocket watch.

The *Bounty* mutineers then needed to find an out-of-the-way place to settle—out of the way so that the navy would never find them. They stopped at Tahiti and 16 of the men stayed there. Christian feared that they'd be too easy to find if they stayed there—Tahiti was a well-known stop for ships sailing across the Pacific. He and the remaining men, plus their Tahitian wives and friends, sailed away to look for a new home. They finally found it at the remote Pitcairn Island. It was a good choice in that no one ever knew what happened to them until 19 years later, when an American ship stopped there and found one of the mutineers still alive. The Americans also met Fletcher Christian's son and several other descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers.

The stories you may have read or seen on film each represent some aspect of these events. What we'll never know is why Fletcher Christian did what he did. Many versions of the story make Captain Bligh out to be a villain and Fletcher Christian out to be a hero. Recent studies show that reality is, of course, more complicated, and that Bligh was probably not the bad guy he's been made out to be. The Royal Navy praised him for his success in sailing the open boat back to safety with the other men and even promoted him.

Without any embellishment, the historical story is still a great tale—there's adventure on the high seas, romance on a tropical island, a clash of personalities, the challenge for survival in the open boat, and a lifetime of hiding from the long arm of the law. ⚓

Captain Bligh

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