

THE LAPEROUSE EXPEDITION

In August 1785 Lapérouse set out from Brest with two ships, *la Boussole* and *l'Astrolabe*, on a scientific voyage of discovery throughout the length and breadth of the Pacific Ocean. More than two and a half years later – in one of history's great co-incidences – on 26 January 1788, the Lapérouse Expedition sailed into Botany Bay, just as the rest of the First Fleet was preparing to set sail from Botany Bay to join Captain Arthur Phillip and the four other ships already at Farm Cove, soon to be the site of the first European settlement in Australia.

In the words of Lapérouse, “*Europeans are all compatriots at such distance from their homeland*”, and despite their astonishment, the English immediately established cordial relations with the French. During the six weeks that the Laperouse Expedition spent on the shore of Botany Bay there was much toing and froing between what is now known as Frenchmans Bay in La Perouse and Farm Cove in Port Jackson, although there is no record of any meeting between the two commanders.

The French established a campsite surrounded by a stockade, planted a garden, set up an observatory, held Catholic masses, made geological observations and built a new longboat to replace the one catastrophically lost in the treacherous tidal currents at the entrance to Lituya Bay in Alaska.

Upon his death on 17 February 1788 Père Laurent Receveur, the Franciscan chaplain and naturalist aboard the *Astrolabe*, was buried there under a tree.

Having entrusted letters, his journal and some charts to the English to be sent back to France, the Lapérouse Expedition set sail from Botany Bay on 10 March 1788, never to be heard from again.

THE LAPEROUSE MONUMENTS

At the instigation of the French navigator, Hyacinthe de Bougainville, who visited Sydney in 1825 while searching for Lapérouse, a monument to the memory of the great navigator was inaugurated in 1828, and at Père Receveur's gravesite a tomb was erected where a commemorative mass is celebrated annually, marking the anniversary of his death. For over 200 years officers and crews from visiting French naval ships, often accompanied by representatives of the Australian navy, have gathered at this historic site at La Perouse to pay their respects. Bastille Day and the foundation of the Lapérouse monument are celebrated every year.

THE LAPEROUSE MYSTERY

The expedition had been expected to make a triumphal return to France by mid 1789. Over the next four decades many French navigators sailed the intended route of Lapérouse through the South Pacific and around the West Australian and Tasmanian coastline, in the hope of finding some trace of the ships and perhaps even some of the crew of what had become the ill-fated Lapérouse Expedition. It is said that as Louis XVI climbed the steps to the guillotine on 21 February 1791, he enquired once more: “*Is there at least any news of Sieur de Lapérouse*”.

Finally in 1826, 38 years after the expedition's departure from Botany Bay, Peter Dillon, an Irish sea-captain with the British East India Company, met a native on the small Pacific island of Tikopia carrying a tarnished silver sword-guard, supposedly from Vanikoro in the Solomon Islands.. Dillon then returned to Bombay where he persuaded the East India Company to equip his return to Vanikoro. There he heard the story of the two ships wrecked on the surrounding reef one night in a terrible storm, and acquired a haul of articles from the wrecks. A report soon reached France and Dumont d'Urville was sent from Tasmania to investigate, reaching Vanikoro on 21 February 1828.

However the fate of the officers and their crews remains a mystery. Did some survivors manage to build a boat and sail away? No trace of them has ever been found.

THE LAPEROUSE MUSEUM

In February 1988 a group of French and Australian residents led by the late Pierre Roussel together with then Commandant François Bellec, Director of Maritime Museums in France, proudly completed a fitting Bicentennial Project that had taken four years of diplomacy, dedication and imagination: housed in an historic building the Lapérouse Museum recalls the story of France's great 18th century navigator and symbolises the special bonds of friendship between Australia and France which date back to the first days of European settlement in 1788. Strengthened by the many navigators including Entrecasteaux, Baudin, Freycinet, Bougainville, Duperrey and Dumont d'Urville who came to search for Laperouse and in so doing charted much of the Australian coastline, perpetuated by the numerous French wool-traders and their families, these same ties of friendship were finally cemented during World War I in the trenches of the Somme, and during World War II in the sky over France and in the Coral Sea.

Jean-François de Galaup, comte de Lapérouse

23 August 1741 – 1788?



“Modern navigators have only one purpose, in describing the customs of new peoples, that of completing the history of mankind; their navigation should complete the charting of the globe; and the enlightenment they seek to impart has for sole aim to increase the happiness of the island dwellers they visit and to add to their means of subsistence.”

Journal of Lapérouse, 30 May 1786, Island of Maui.



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Jean-François de Galaup, comte de Lapérouse—Naval Commander and Explorer (1741-1788?)

Born in 1741 Jean-François de Galaup was the eldest son of a well to do family of landowners from Albi in south-western France. Aged 15 he left the Jesuit College in Albi to join the French Navy and was immediately plunged into action, leaving for Canada where France was at war with England. In the disastrous naval battle of Quiberon Bay (1759) he was wounded and taken prisoner by the British, spending almost two years in captivity.

In 1764 Lapérouse sailed to Bengal, India and China and was posted in 1771 to the Isle de France (present day Mauritius) where he met and fell in love with Eléonore Broudou, a young Creole of modest origins. For five years he was engaged in the defence of French possessions in the Indian Ocean where, once again, France and England were rivals.

As commander of the *Astrée* in 1780 Lapérouse participated victoriously in the battle of Louisburg against the British Royal Navy off the American coast. Commissioned in 1782 to destroy British installations in the Hudson Straits in northern Canada, he displayed brilliant seamanship and tactical ability, capturing three ships and the forts Prince of Wales and York. The British garrison had fled, but Lapérouse did not destroy its supplies, as men could have starved in the coming winter. For his courage and this generous gesture, he was warmly commended to Louis XVI. By late 1782 he was back in France and finally granted permission to marry Eléonore Broudou despite her lack of noble birth.

A SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION AROUND THE WORLD

After the Treaty of Versailles in 1783, when peace had been established and seemed likely to last for some time, Louis XVI enthusiastically appointed Lapérouse to lead a prestigious French scientific expedition around the world.

The King's instructions were precise: to complete the Pacific discoveries of Captain James Cook, correct and complete maps of the coastlines, enrich French scientific knowledge and collections and open new trade routes.



In the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment, the prestigious *Académie des Sciences* was requested to devise programmes for important astronomical, geographical, botanical and zoological observations.

Two of Louis XVI's personal instructions read: "*On all occasions Sieur de Lapérouse will act with great gentleness and humanity towards the different peoples whom he will visit during the course of his voyage*".

"His Majesty will consider it as one of the happiest events of the expedition if it should end without costing the life of a single man"

PLANNING THE EXPEDITION

Two ships of 500 tons, *l'Astrolabe* and *la Boussole*, named to indicate the scientific nature of the voyage, were laboriously and lavishly equipped for a long and arduous four-year expedition. Lapérouse himself carefully selected most of the scholars and scientists: the engineer Monneron, the geographer Bernizet, the astronomers Dagelet and Abbé Monge, the mineralogist Lamanon, the botanists Collignon and Lamartinière, the naturalists Père Receveur and Dufresne. Duché de Vancy was the senior artist to record people and places while the Prévosts, uncle and nephew, were engaged to paint natural history specimens.

A library of over 125 titles was assembled, including the journals of other French and foreign voyages and books relating to all aspects of astronomy, navigation, physics and natural history.

All kinds of French and English scientific instruments were taken on board. Monneron was sent to London where Sir Joseph Banks arranged the loan of two inclining compasses that had been used by Cook himself (which Lapérouse regarded with feelings of veneration), and where he was able to buy scientific instruments, including two sextants of a new type. He also gathered information about scurvy-prevention measures recommended by Cook.

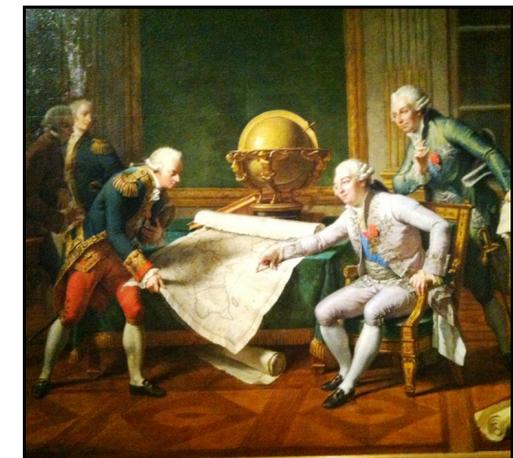
The ships were crammed with every conceivable store and supply, including a vast array of goods for trade and gifts for the indigenous peoples. The decks were swarming with livestock.

THE CREW

Without hesitation, Lapérouse chose as second-in-command his friend Vicomte Fleuriot de Langle, a man much admired for his ability, education and strength of character. The officers were selected from the men they knew and had sailed with. Among them, the Irishman Sutton de Clonard, who would later have to replace Langle and approach the British officers of the First Fleet in Botany Bay.

It is said that a young Corsican officer named Napoleon Bonaparte requested to join the expedition but was not accepted.

Lapérouse's flagship *la Boussole* had a crew of 111 and *l'Astrolabe* 114. On the 1st of August 1785 the two ships, sailed from the port of Brest into the Atlantic.



Louis XVI giving Lapérouse his instructions on 29 June 1785, by Nicolas-André Monsiau (1817). (Château de Versailles)