Chapter 1: Setting Out

Recherche and Espérance under way.


La Pérouse should have sailed home to France during 1789. Despite overriding current political and revolutionary preoccupations, his absence rated highly in the national consciousness. Presumably rivalry with England over issues of global discovery and annexation, combined with trading prospects in the new lands were all factors in the situation. In this era of discovery the Société d’Histoire Naturelle was also concerned for the safety of scientific collections made by La Pérouse. The thrill and importance of new discoveries proved an incentive to the scientific vitality of the Société, just as London’s Royal Society was stimulated by Cook, Bligh and other explorers. The Société agreed that it was urgent to locate the missing La Pérouse, so it petitioned the then ruling Constituent Assembly in Paris. On 9 February 1791, the Assembly voted affirmatively, issuing a formulaic decree to the king to dispatch a rescue mission.
While Louis XVI was at this time a virtual prisoner and puppet, he remained forlornly dedicated to learn the fate of La Pérouse, to whom he had personally entrusted special objectives, including the need to adopt a humanitarian view towards newly found exotic peoples. Louis therefore offered enthusiastic support. It is evident that the rescue expedition was widely supported by the government, because 1,160,000 livres were made available from the French naval budget of 30 million livres.\(^1\) Instruments and other costs brought total expenditure to 1,369,516 livres.

Antoine-Raymond-Joseph Bruny d’Entrecasteaux (1737–93) was named leader with responsibility to command two vessels to be made ready for the search and rescue expedition. The expedition was intended to combine this objective with
scientific discovery and the accurate charting of unknown regions. There is no indication that land annexation was an objective. Although d’Entrecasteaux was promoted upon departure of the ships to the flag rank of rear-admiral, shipboard diarists termed him ‘General’, because the term admiral had not yet come into common use in France. A member of the minor nobility, d’Entrecasteaux had pursued a distinguished naval career both in war and peace since his enlistment in 1754. It culminated in 1787 with a term as Governor of Île de France (Mauritius). He was an experienced captain and navigator, a character who commanded loyalty and a conciliator, by the time he returned to France in 1790.

During his career, the traditional control of the navy and its officer corps lay entirely with persons of noble birth or connection, entitling officers, as gardes de la marine to wear a conspicuous red uniform. Just before the French Revolution, in 1786, reforms introduced into the navy produced a more efficient and rational system. This included admitting officers of lower social rank, bourgeois recruits who usually were merchant marine officers who transferred to the navy. A midshipman with six years service might also join officer ranks following an examination. Such newly recruited officers wore blue uniforms, a reminder of their more lowly social status.

Although the Constituent Assembly integrated these two officer branches in October 1789, it became a significant irritant during the expedition because of rivalry between the ‘red’ officers — traditional royal loyalists — and the ‘blue’ officers — most of whom were republicans. Testimony to the respect in which officers and crew held d’Entrecasteaux is that he had no major disciplinary problems. Many naval vessels in those years faced difficulties with revolutionary-stimulated ill discipline. This was particularly the case with crews drawn from Brest, where a mutiny occurred during 1790. This expedition was fitted out and crewed at Brest.

**The Officers**

D’Entrecasteaux was given freedom to select his own officers and he recruited several men who had served under him and in whose capabilities he trusted; their uniforms were red. As this book concerns Recherche Bay rather than the entire voyaging, only those persons who contributed to events there are discussed.

To captain Espérance, d’Entrecasteaux turned to his former experienced first lieutenant and friend, Jean-Michel Huon de Kermadec (1748–93), who was promoted to the rank of flag-captain. Unfortunately, Kermadec, at 43 the oldest officer, was already in poor health and, though a man of rough humour, was physically weak and irresolute at times. Yet he was trusted by d’Entrecasteaux, sent to Brest with the tasks of supervising the remodelling of two ships for
expedition requirements, provisioning the vessels and recruiting their crews. Consequently, the Breton region supplied most of the men. At this period, while crewmen had medical examinations, officers were exempt. Kermadec was not the only officer who would never have sailed had he been examined medically, and the voyage cost him his life.

Another favoured officer known to d’Entrecasteaux was Elisabeth-Paul-Édouard de Rossel (1765–1829) who, when a senior midshipman, had shown promise in making nautical observations. Aged only 26, he was an excellent choice and a vital member of the expedition. Rossel was destined to become ultimate commander of the expedition and its chief astronomer. In later life, Rossel became the distinguished head of the French Bureau des Longitudes and editor of his late captain’s journal. A royalist sympathiser, a contemporary described him as ‘a little man as round as a barrel,’ ugly, gentle and cheerful.

When d’Entrecasteaux governed Ile de France, Alexis-Ignace de Crestin (1763–94) was his aide-de-camp; he was invited to join him again as a lieutenant. Jean-Baptiste-Philibert Willaumez (1793–1843) also served previously under d’Entrecasteaux as an ensign, the title then given to sub-lieutenants who were promoted from the lower deck. Despite his republicanism, d’Entrecasteaux’s trust was justified by his valuable contribution. Willaumez, then 28, rose to be a vice-admiral and, despite his republicanism, a count.

Another recruit known to be reliable was Alexandre-François de le Fresnoy de Saint-Aignan (1768–1849) who added violin playing to his naval capabilities. While his music was appreciated on board, his fiddle was to irritate Aboriginal Tasmanians. When the vessels departed, lieutenants Rossel, Crestin, Willaumez and Saint-Aignan all sailed on the Recherche, with d’Entrecasteaux.

Command of Recherche went to an officer not known to d’Entrecasteaux, but who came highly recommended. Alexandre d’Hesmivy d’Auribeau (1760–94) was promoted flag-captain during the voyage. An unfortunate choice, he was an extremely haughty royalist, belonging to a noble Provencal family. He proved a capable sailor and a sound observer of Aborigines, but his arrogant personality encouraged personality clashes at sea and it was to have serious implications for the expedition’s termination in Java. He also suffered chronic ill health, which should have disqualified his participation. There is some belief that he also took drugs.

On Espérance, commanded by Kermadec, one of the lieutenants had also served under d’Entrecasteaux. This was Claude-Marie-Dominique de la Grandière (1767–95). He should not be confused with his shipmate, 19-year-old Julien de la Gravière (1772–1849), who wrote a private and unpublished account of the voyage, which was used by his son, in 1860, to write a life of his father. Both father and son rose to admiral rank. Lieutenant Trobriand, aged 26, proved a
reliable officer and later served practically in command of *Espérance* due to his Captain’s illness.

Also aboard *Espérance* was sub-lieutenant Jacques-Malo La Motte du Portail (1761–1812). A staunch royalist, yet a former merchant marine officer, he became soured because he was not promoted to the rank he desired. His jaundiced version of ship life provides helpful insights into daily routine. In particular, a series of letters that he wrote survived, although they were never sent to his supposed fiancée, Zélie. There are doubts as to whether Zélie even existed, because this may have been his secretive means of frank journal keeping that would not risk confiscation. If so, he succeeded, because most officers were forced to surrender their journals at the voyage end, in Java.

The youth of officers is a striking feature of the crews. Except for Kermadec, the age of officers on both ships ranged between Jurien, aged 19, and d’Auribeau, aged 31. Several men in their mid-20s performed admirably when responsibility was thrust upon them through illness, death or opportunities to explore. Rossel assumed command at 28 years of age.

**The Savants**

The naval captains and officers had to adapt to both crowded quarters and mostly bourgeois civilians appointed as scientists (termed naturalists). As civilians, these men were not subject to naval laws and regulations, although they claimed privileges similar to the officers. Understandably, their purpose lay in discovery and collecting on land, so their concerns frequently conflicted with those of the officers whose function was with the ocean and its weather, tides and timetable. The scientists always desired more time to explore, the sailors to up-anchor. A further likely cause of friction developed between the mostly royalist officers and the naturalist intellectuals, the majority of whom were republicans. These factors became evident at Recherche Bay and were later to have serious consequences on Java.

D’Entrecasteaux was well aware of the problems of sailing with civilians. Having experienced friction aboard en route to Cape Town, he wrote to his Minister on 13 February 1792 expressing his feelings and annoyance as a naval officer:

> nothing is more harmful to an expedition of this kind than to employ resources foreign to the service, for [naturalists] come with extraordinary pretensions. Ignorance of the regulations makes them think they are being submitted to humiliating treatment; boredom and the idleness of shipboard life makes them unsettled, suspicious and inclined to foment troubles.³

Such incidents and tensions also worked both ways. At Cape Town, the chief astronomer, an artist, and the mineralogist disembarked to return home.
Jacques-Julien Houton de Labillardière.

Given the rudimentary state of scientific disciplines at this period and the limited expertise for investigating new lands amongst the scientific group, those men recommended by the Société d’Histoire Naturelle possessed qualifications of some potential and their activities justified their inclusion. The unfortunate loss of some collections and the confiscation of their journals negated the work of some naturalists, through no fault of their own.

The oldest, most senior and most vexatious scientist was Jacques-Julien Houton de Labillardière (1755–1834), who conveniently and, as a republican, democratically chose simply to be called Labillardière. Born into a provincial middle class Normandy family, he studied medicine at Montpellier, Reims and Paris. However, he became a botanist of repute, with field experience in Europe and Syria. For two years he lived in London, where he studied the plants brought back by James Cook. Fortunately for his future career, he met Sir Joseph Banks while in England. He was a person of strong convictions and it is testimony to d’Entrecasteaux’s tolerant command that only one incident, discussed later, is known of his firmly disputing Labillardière’s demands.

Louis-August Deschamps (1755–1842) and Claude-Antoine Gaspard Riche (1762–97) also took medical degrees before moving into natural science. Their division of duties was determined by d’Entrecasteaux only when they were at Amboina, following the first visit to Recherche Bay. Labillardière was undisputed in the botanical field, Riche took birds, shells and worms, while Deschamps was responsible for mammals, fish, amphibians and insects. In the absence of a mineralogist, Deschamps also assumed that duty.

Louis Ventenat (1765–94) was a priest, originally chaplain and confessor to d’Entrecasteaux, who later banished him to the Espérance for possibly encouraging insubordination below decks (he was a republican in sentiment). As an enlisted naval person he was subject to naval rules, which also meant that he did not receive as much remuneration as the naturalists were paid. He proved to be a conscientious and thoughtful assistant botanist. Ventenat possessed a sense of humour. Admitting that he and Riche got themselves lost on occasion, he wryly observed, ‘Mr Deschamps was never in this predicament; he took care always to be on board for breakfast, dinner and supper.’ Indeed, Deschamps contributed least of all to the savants on the voyage and in the end his collections and journal became lost during his return voyage to France in 1803. His ship was captured by the Royal Navy and his collections were seized.

Riche belonged to a Lyons district legal family who achieved high medical results. As he was a consumptive, the voyage may have been taken as a health cure. A republican of conviction, he travelled on the Espérance. Labillardière and Deschamps were shipmates on Recherche, but there any similarity ceases. Labillardière was an impatient explorer, spending undue time on the land to the
commander’s annoyance. Royalist Deschamps hailed from St Omer, near Calais, and chose to remain aboard ship much of the time available for fieldwork.

Industrious Felix Delahaye (1767–1829) was engaged as gardener-botanist, following enthusiastic recommendations from the head of the celebrated Paris botany school, *Jardin du Roi*, soon to be renamed *Jardin des Plantes*, where he worked. He arrived in Brest with four cases of garden seeds, one of fruit tree nuts, one containing gardening tools and another gardener’s clothing. His activities and dedication surely merited status ranking with the naturalists, but the unfortunate man, who was to play a central role in determining the heritage fortunes of Recherche Bay, was exiled to eat and sleep in the fetid crew’s quarters. The Bligh of France, he took breadfruit plants to Mauritius.

Astronomical observations were to have been the responsibility of Abbé Claude Bertrand (1755–92). His intrepid spirit seemed assured, because in 1784 he ascended in a balloon, only one year after the first airborne balloon. His reputation commanded the highest remuneration of 3,000 livres per annum, whereas most naturalists received 2,400 livres; lowly Delahaye’s annual salary was only 1,000 livres, although he received compensation of 1,236 livres for his practical equipment.

Much to everyone’s gratification, Bertrand abandoned the expedition at Cape Town because his health and character proved unacceptable for a long, crowded voyage. A Benedictine chaplain, Dom Ambroise Pierson (1765–94) assisted conscientiously in the essential astronomical work. In Bertrand’s absence, however, it was Lieutenant Rossel who distinguished himself in the astronomical field, together with measuring terrestrial magnetism at various latitudes. When he later published the d’Entrecasteaux journal, he added considerable detail concerning the astronomical record. He received enthusiastic astronomical assistance, also, from Willaumez and an 18-year-old midshipman, Achard de Bonvouloir.

An important objective of the expedition was to chart unknown coastlines. In hydrography and cartography, new international standards in accuracy were set by Charles-François Beaufemps-Beaupré (1766–1854), and nowhere better than in Tasmanian waters. Aged only 25, he applied new techniques of surveying, described later. This was the beginning of a career that made him a Grand Officer of the Legion of Honour. He sailed on *Recherche*.

Like Miroir-Jouvency (ca 1754–98) aboard *Espérance*, Beaufemps-Beaupré was termed a geographer in the parlance of that time, but surveyors and cartographers they both were. Miroir-Jouvency had the prior experience of mapping Corsica but, although active, his role was less productive than that of the ever busy Beaufemps-Beaupré.
Each vessel carried an artist, but only one of them sailed beyond Cape Town. This was Jean Piron, about whom little is known and many of whose drawings were lost. He befriended Labillardiè re and explored Recherche Bay with him. Fortunately, he presented copies of some drawings, including those of Tasmanian people, to his friend. Consequently, Labillardiè re included them as illustrations in his book, published in 1800. In this way, priceless visual records were preserved of French contacts with the Tasmanians. That he portrayed them according to the rubrics of classical art is less important than that he depicted them sympathetically as friendly and fully human people, indicating that their stoicism derived from the hard life they had, as opposed to the ‘soft’ primitivism of Polynesians.

There was one crew member aboard the Recherche whose presence attracts modern media attention and gossipy surmises. This was the steward, Louis Girardin, actually Louise (1754–94), the only female on the expedition. Her disguise was maintained throughout, even to fighting a duel that resulted in her receiving a wounded arm. Even so, her slight figure and facial appearance made her suspect, although the fact that d’Entrecasteaux provided her with a tiny separate cabin assisted greatly in her deception.

Louise clearly could look after herself, despite taunts from suspicious crew. From a bourgeois family — her father was a Versailles wine merchant — she was a youthful-looking 38 years old. She had been widowed, then borne an illegitimate child to a lover who deserted her. Fleeing from her wrathful father, she was assisted by a widowed sister of Kermadec, presumably a former Versailles friend. She coaxed Kermadec to give her a place in the crew of the ship he then commanded. When a mutiny threatened, he had her transferred to the Recherche.

Surely d’Entrecasteaux knew her secret, but there is no evidence that she granted sexual favours to anyone. Even the cynical and forthright La Motte du Portail told Zélie, that ‘we did not really have anything positive on which to ground our suspicion, and our suspicions were based only on the way this person was built’. Whatever the gossip concerning Louise, her presence must have provoked many tensions and subjects for coarse discussion on the voyage. She remained undetected until her death in Java.

There was one other person in the crew about whom only one passing reference has been found. In writing his official report of a boat journey on 20 May 1792, Lieutenant Saint Aignan reported that his team included Crestin, three men ‘and the little cabinboy Hypolite’. French naval vessels carried a number of cabinboys, termed ‘mousse’. This lad presumably was Charles-François-Hipolite Deslacs d’Arcambal (1777–1805), of Parisian aristocratic birth who died at Trafalgar. Cape Deslacs, which they surveyed while he was in the boat, was presumably named in his honour. It is west of the Tasman Peninsula. The Hippolyte rocks, east of that peninsula may have a similar origin. The rocks were known by that
name when Baudin sailed past in 1802. So this 15-year-old lad’s name is remembered today, while places named for many senior shipmates were replaced by British nomenclature.

It is noteworthy that when the ships sailed from Brest, all but two of the Recherche officers had served previously under d’Entrecasteaux, who had chosen them for this enterprise. The companion vessel was commanded by his friend Kermadec, to whom he entrusted the vital task of equipping and victualling the expedition. Within contemporary standards, most of the naturalists and geographers were well qualified and they received the approval of French scientific societies. This should have proven a harmonious and successful voyage, yet it ended in death and disaster, while La Pérouse was never found. At Recherche Bay, however, its scientific achievements were of global significance, while interaction between sailors and Tasmanians proved a model of mutual respect and observation.

The crews were recruited largely from the revolutionary Brest area, so while many officers were loyal to the king, most Breton seamen would have held republican sentiments. The vessels therefore reflected a microcosm of French revolutionary society, so it points to the diplomatic control exerted by d’Entrecasteaux that he kept shipboard order. For the mostly republican savants, their departure from France in those revolutionary times combined with the anticipation of discoveries. Wordsworth’s celebrated lines (The Prelude, Book 2, lines 108-9) are appropriate to their emotions:

Bliss it was that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven

**Ships and Stores**

In the Captain Cook tradition, preference was given to solid roomy craft for the expedition. Naval storeships (gabare) were chosen, the same class as La Pérouse’s two vessels, l’Astrolobe and La Boussole. The selected ships originally were named Truite and Duranse. The former, a four year old vessel, was imaginatively renamed Recherche, while the second ship became Espérance (Hope). This latter was built 10 years earlier and it proved tediously slow. Both craft were comparable in size and were reclassified as frigates (ironically implying swiftness). Recherche measured 114 by 26 feet (34.7m x 8m). Earlier sources gave their tonnage as 500, but following a critical appraisal of their measurements by Frank Horner, his more reliable estimate made their tonnage closer to 350. This means that they were comparable in size to Cook’s Endeavour and Flinders’ Investigator, much smaller than a true frigate.

Vessels of this type were crewed normally by 60 sailors, but due to their special requirements each now required capacity for 110 persons. In an attempt to save deck space (and, incidentally, showing their peaceful intentions) most cannon
were removed. Three 8-pounders remained on either side of the gundeck, while two of the recently developed close-range 20-pounder carronades were added. On both ships this armament was cluttered and confined by pens holding six sheep and 50 fowls. Added armament on each ship included 45 muskets, 35 pistols, 130 battle-axes and 50 swords.\textsuperscript{10}

On each vessel provision had to be made for extra accommodation and stores. This was met by constructing an orlop deck below the lower deck. This divided the deep hold in half, to which meagre light and ventilation came through three hatches. Cabins were crammed into any available deck spaces, while the captains occupied special quarters built on the quarterdeck. The great cabin across the stern served multiple functions — as the mess for officers and scientists, a meetings area, and a much disputed working place for the naturalists. As for the crew, they socialised on deck in the confined space beside the long boats. Iron galleys instead of brick cooking galleys were installed. Each ship had a small corn-grinding windmill installed above the poop deck. Little bread was baked from the flour, however, as one mill soon toppled during a storm.

For voyaging into the unknown, the hulls required strengthening against grounding or damage and it was becoming customary to attach thin copper sheeting, whose smoothness assisted speed and offered protection against worms and barnacles. An alternative solution was necessary in the event that this protection needed to be replaced, as copper would be unavailable in remote lands. This solution was a double hull of pinewood into which flat-headed nails were hammered so closely together that they virtually presented an unbroken metal surface. An ingenious solution, but at a cost, because the surface was not as smooth as copper sheeting, so the nails served to slow the ship and encourage weed growth.

Kermadec was instructed to secure only good quality rations, although in this task the future proved that dishonest provisioners ignored him. When opened on the high seas, many stores were stale and weevil infested. During the late eighteenth century the staple French seaman’s monotonous ration amounted to a daily issue of 600 grams of bread or biscuit, fresh or salted meat or cod, cheese and dried or pickled vegetables. Sometimes special items were provided, such as soup tablets, butter and coffee. In theory this provided about 4,000 calories daily, a diet superior to that of most peasants ashore, although it was seriously deficient in vitamin C. Naval officers received a monetary table allowance, so they brought their own rations, or purchased food and drink at ports of call. Naturalists followed the same practice.\textsuperscript{11}

Then there were liquid supplies. Water required regular replenishment, but alcohol proved less available to explorers. An indication of French thirst was provided by Bougainville’s voyage to the Pacific during the 1760s. His crew of 200 drew upon 50,000 litres of water and 60,000 litres of wine and brandy.
Scurvy posed the critical sea voyaging problem of the era. Sailors succumbed to unaccountable lassitude and debility due to vitamin C deficiency (ascorbic acid). Swollen and bleeding gums, loosened teeth, stiffness in joints and anaemia followed. It was believed that antidotes were sauerkraut and vinegar, or citrus fruit. Consequently, the expedition carried lemon rob, a syrup made from boiled lemons. Unfortunately, the boiling process probably destroyed the essential vitamin C, robbing the rob of much value. Everybody at that time deferred to Captain James Cook’s wisdom, so they relied upon quantities of malt extract, a residue from brewing, which he favoured, served as spruce beer. Modern opinion is that Cook erred. Malt extract lacked vitamin C, so it was not antiscorbutic.

A decade later — too late to save lives on the d’Entrecasteaux expedition — Nicolas Baudin found a partial solution. His crew had suffered severely on the voyage to Sydney. In 1802, he pursued library research in Sydney, due to the courtesy of Governor King. He consulted 35 narratives of voyaging and determined that scurvy became serious only when ships exceeded 60 to 70 days at sea between ports. So he wisely put into port more frequently and took lime juice aboard, proving the correctness of his deductions. The d’Entrecasteaux vessels frequently exceeded the 60 days rule. Baudin’s research was shown to be valid only in 1986. Clinical trials in USA proved that the store of vitamin C in a human body disappears within 68 to 90 days.  

ENDNOTES