Abel Tasman: background

Full name: Abel Janszoon Tasman
Born: about 1603; Lutjegast (near Groningen), Holland
Died: 1659; Batavia (Jakarta)
Best remembered for: Tasman was the first European to sight and explore the lands now known as Tasmania and New Zealand.

Little is known about Tasman's early life, although it is known he was working as a seaman by the age of 30. Around this time, he was given the job of skippering ships for the Dutch East India Company (see text box). In 1638, Tasman made Batavia (now known as Jakarta) his home.

From 1639, Tasman's main voyages were ones of discovery, rather than trading. In the three years from 1639 to 1642, Tasman played a leading role in voyages of discovery to Japan, Sumatra, China and Cambodia. This experience led to Anthony van Diemen, the Governor-General of Dutch East Indies, appointing Tasman to lead an expedition to explore the world's southern waters. The two ships selected for the expedition left Batavia on 14 August 1642. It was on this expedition that Tasman sighted and landed on Van Diemen's Land (now known as Tasmania).

The Dutch East India Company

During the 1600s, the Dutch East India Company was the most powerful company in the world. The Dutch Government gave the Dutch East India Company total control of trade in the East Indies, an area ruled by the Dutch. The Dutch East India Company traded in spices and wood from the East Indies; coffee from Arabia, cotton from India, silk and porcelain from China, and gold, silver and copper from Japan. The centre of the company's operations was in Batavia.

Leaving Batavia

Organising an expedition from Batavia to the southern waters was a lot easier than organising one from Europe. In fact, it took just two weeks for Anthony van Diemen and his advisers to find the crew and provisions required to man two ships. The Heemskerck (also referred to as the Heemskirk) was to carry a crew of 60; the Zeeland (also referred to as the Zeehaen) a crew of 50. Despite the relatively close location of the waters to be explored, the organisers planned for a voyage of up to 18 months. With Tasman aboard the Heemskerck, the ships set sail on 14 August 1642.

The following extracts are from Tasman's journal, as translated by Dr J. E. Heeres.

This day August 14, A.D. 1642, we set sail from the roads of Batavia with two ships, to wit: the yacht "Heemskirk" and the flute "Zeehaen," the wind being north-east with good weather. On the same day in the evening the "Zeehaen" ran aground near the Island of Rotterdam, but got off again in the night without any notable damage, after which we continued our voyage to the Straits of Sunda.

The Straits of Sunda divide the islands of Sumatra and Java.

Provisions

Many items were loaded aboard the Heemskerck and Zeehaen for the journey. Some of the provisions were for the crew; others were for trading with local peoples when contact was made. The following items were included on a list of provisions for the Heemskerck:

- 500 Chinese small mirrors
- 19 pounds (8.6 kilograms) of elephant teeth
- 2 packets of tinsel
- 200 pounds (90.7 kilograms) of ironmongery
- 50 pounds (22.7 kilograms) of Dutch steel
- 50 pounds (22.7 kilograms) of sandalwood
- 20 pounds (9.07 kilograms) of cloves
- 200 small Chinese wooden combs
- 10 packets of Chinese gold wire
- 50 pounds (22.7 kilograms) of ebony
- 1 large brass basin.
The last frontier

It took just over three months for the Zeehan and the Heemskerck to make their way to the southern waters where they would discover Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania). They first sailed to Mauritius, an island off the east coast of Africa. There, repairs were made to the ships to ensure they were sturdy enough to make the upcoming journey.

The Zeehan and the Heemskerck sailed south from Mauritius, then turned east into waters that were considered one of the last frontiers for sailors of that era. They faced winds and oceans that were completely unknown to them. On 24 November, land was sighted. As this was the first land sighted in the southern waters, Tasman named it after the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies.

24 November
Good weather, clear sky. After noon, at around 4 o’clock, we sighted land ... It was a very high land.

25 November
Towards noon the wind turned to the south-east, and afterwards to the south-east and the south; upon which we made for the shore; at about 5 o’clock in the evening we got near the coast.

This land being the first land we have met with in the South Sea, and not known to any European nation, we have conferred on it the name of Anthony Van Diemen’s land, in honour of the Hon. Governor-General, our illustrious master, who sent us to make this discovery.

Setting anchor

Over the next few days, Tasman made several attempts to anchor the ships safely so that he could send a few men ashore to investigate the land. However, he was constantly thwarted by unsuitable locations and unpredictable weather. Finally, on 1 December, they set anchor and the following day Tasman sent some men ashore. The men returned with some plants that were eagerly inspected and tasted.

1 December
We got a breeze from eastward, and made for the coast to ascertain whether it would afford a fitting anchorage; about one hour after sunset we dropped anchor in a good harbour, in 22 fathoms, white and grey fine sand, a naturally drying bottom; for all which it behoves us to thank God Almighty with grateful hearts.

Cabo de Bona Esperance

Cabo de Bona Esperance is Dutch for the Cape of Good Hope. The Cape of Good Hope is situated on the south-west tip of the African continent. For hundreds of years, it was the rounding point for vessels travelling between the South Atlantic and Indian oceans. This cape received its name because the journey ahead offered hope for those seeking riches in the east.

2 December
Early in the morning we sent our Pilot-Major Francisco Jacobse Vassher in command of our pinnace, manned with 4 musketeers and 6 rovers ... together with the cock-boat of the “Zeehaen” with one of her second mates and 6 musketeers in it, to a bay situated north-west of us upwards of a mile’s distance, in order to ascertain what facilities (as regards fresh water, refreshments, timber, and the like) may be available there. About three hours before nightfall the boats came back, bringing various samples of vegetables, which they had seen growing there in great abundance, some of them in appearance not unlike a certain plant growing at the Cabo de Bona Esperance (see text box), and fit to be used as pot-herbs, and another species with long leaves and a brackish taste.
First-hand impressions

Tasman’s journal also records the impressions of the men that went ashore. They were the first Europeans to set foot on Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania). While they did not see any of the indigenous people, they did see and hear evidence of human habitation.

The Pilot-Major and the second mate of the “Zeewaen” made the following report, to wit:-

That they had heard certain human sounds, and also sounds nearly resembling the music of a trump or a small gong not far from them, though they had seen no one.

That they had seen two trees about 2 or 2½ fathom in thickness, measuring from 60 to 65 feet from the ground to the uppermost branches, which trees bore notches made with flint implements, the bark having been removed for the purpose; these notches, forming a kind of steps to enable persons to get up the trees and rob the birds’ nests in their tops, were fully 5 feet apart, so that our men concluded that the natives here must be of very tall stature, or must be in possession of some sort of artifice for getting up the said trees; in one of these trees these notched steps were so fresh and new that they seemed to have been cut less than four days ago.

Claiming the land

On 3 December, two days after setting anchor, Tasman and some crew members boarded one of their small boats with the intention of rowing to shore and planting the Dutch flag in the soil. Again, harsh conditions frustrated the men but Tasman ordered one of the men to swim to shore and carry out the deed. No doubt the poor man found the waters of southern Tasmania somewhat colder than those around the East Indies, where the voyage had begun.

3 December

When we had come close inshore in a small inlet which bore west-south-west of the ships, the surf ran so high that we could not get near the shore without running the risk of having our pinnace dashed to pieces. We then ordered the carpenter to swim to the shore alone, with the pole and the flag, and kept by the wind with our pinnace; we made him plant the said pole with the flag at top into the earth, about the centre of the bay near four tall trees easily recognizable and standing in the form of a crescent ...

Our master carpenter, having in the sight of myself, Abel Jansz Tasman, Skipper Gerrit Jansz, and Sub-cargo Abraham Coomans, performed the work entrusted to him, we pulled with our pinnace as near the shore we ventured to do; the carpenter aforesaid thereupon swam back to the pinnace through the surf. This work having been duly executed, we pulled back to the ships, leaving the abovementioned as a memorial for those who shall come after us, and for the natives of this country, who did not show themselves, though we suspect some of them were at no great distance and closely watching our proceedings.

Naval terms explained

Most journals from seafaring explorers of the past contain terms relating to measurement and navigation. Here are explanations for the terms fathom and knot.

- fathom: a unit of depth equal to 6 feet or 1.8288 metres. Navigators measured the depth of the sea by lowering a weighted rope into the water. The seaman lowering the lead line measured how much rope was lowered before it hit the seabed.
- knot: a unit of speed equal to about 1.85 kilometres per hour. The term comes from the practice of dragging a rope behind a moving ship. The rope had knots tied into it every 50 feet, 8 inches. The speed of the boat was calculated by the number of knots that went overboard every 30 seconds.

Van Diemen’s Land was home to the Lairmirrere, Nuenonne, Paredareme, Peerappne, Pyemmairrere, Tommeginne, Toogee and Tyrrennotepanner peoples.
Sighting New Zealand

After leaving Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), Tasman sailed south and made another major discovery. On 13 December, he became the first European to sight New Zealand. He marked the event by hoisting a white flag, which was a sign that officers aboard the Zeehan should come aboard the Heemskerck.

13 December
Towards noon we saw a large, high-lying land, bearing south-east of us at about 15 miles' distance. We turned our course to the south-east, making straight for this land, fired a gun and in the afternoon hoisted the white flag, upon which the officers of the Zeehan came on board of us, with whom we resolved to touch at the said land as quickly as at all possible.

While anchored off the shore, Tasman and his men were approached by several boats full of Maori men. The result was a clash that left several of Tasman's crew dead. Tasman's account lays the blame on the Maoris, but the Maoris obviously felt threatened by the European strangers.

19 December
They struck the "Zeehan's" cock-boat so violently ... that it got a violent lurch, upon which the foremost man in this boat of villains with a long, blunted pike thrust the quartermaster Cornelis Joppin in the neck several times with so much force, that the poor man fell overboard. Upon this the other natives, with short thick clubs ... fell upon the men in the cock-boat, and overcame them by main force, in which fray three of our men were killed, and a fourth got mortally wounded through the heavy blows. The quarter-master and two sailors swam to our ship, whence we had sent our pinnace to pick them up, which they got into alive.

Tasman remembered

More than 30 locations or physical features have the name Tasman in them. These include:
- Tasmania: Australia's island state
- Tasman Bay: a bay on the south-east coast of Tasmania
- Tasman Island: an island off the south-east coast of Tasmania
- Tasman National Park: a national park on the south-east coast of Tasmania
- Tasman River: a river in north-west Tasmania.

Back to Batavia

Tasman did not give this land the name 'New Zealand'. Instead, he thought it might be part of an existing land off the south-west coast of South America, known to the Dutch as Staten Landt. Today, this land is known as Chile, but in the days of Tasman it was believed to have been part of a great southern land.

19 December
We deemed it quite possible that this land is part of the great Staten Landt, though this is not certain. This land seems to be a very fine country, and we trust that this is the mainland coast of the unknown South-land. To this course we have given the name of Abel Tasman passage, because he has been the first to navigate it.

From New Zealand, the Zeehan and Heemskerck headed north-west and Tasman became the first European to discover Tonga and the Fijian islands. Tasman arrived back in Batavia (Jakarta) on 15 June 1643. The last words he wrote in his journal of this expedition were:

15 June
In the morning, at daybreak, I went to Batavia in the pinnace. God be thanked for this happy voyage. Amen.

Signed
Abel Jansz Tasman

Apart from the discoveries of Van Diemen's Land, New Zealand, Tonga and the Fijian islands, Tasman had shown that a passage existed to the Pacific Ocean and South America by way of the southern waters. However, these discoveries were not enough to satisfy Governor-General Van Diemen and the other organisers of the 1642 expedition. They were disappointed that Tasman had not spent more time exploring these new lands and determining whether they had natural resources that would be profitable for the Dutch East India Company.
Tasman navigates the north coast (1644)

In 1644, Tasman set off for another exploration into southern waters. This time, however, he explored the waters to the north of the Australian continent, not around Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). Unfortunately, Tasman's journal of this expedition has never been recovered, although it is very likely that he kept one. The following extracts are from a translation of the instructions given to Tasman for his 1644 voyage.

Instructions for the commodore, Captain Abel Jansz Tasman, the skipper chief-pilot, Franz Jacobz Visser, and the counsel of the yachts Limmen and Zeemewou, and the tender de Brah, destined for a nearer discovery of Nova Guinea, and the unknown coasts of the discovered east and south lands, together with the channels and the islands supposed to be situated between and near them.

Last year (under your direction) the discovery of the remaining unknown south lands was assiduously re-attempted; and in that remarkable voyage was that great unknown Staten and Van Diemen's Land discovered from 35° to 43° south latitude, and at the same time the (so long wished for) passage to the South Sea but it is unnecessary to relate more here as you are perfectly acquainted with all particulars.

But to obtain a thorough knowledge of these extensive countries the discovery whereof has been begun ... now only remains for the future to discover whether Nova Guinea is one continent with that great southern land, or separated by channels and islands lying between them; and also whether New Van Diemen's Land is the same continent with these two great countries or with one of them; or, if separated from them, what islands may be dispersed between Nova Guinea and the unknown south land, when after more experience and knowledge of all the said known and unknown countries, we shall be better enabled for further undertakings.

While the instructions to Tasman clearly stated he was to explore the waters around New Guinea, as well as make another expedition to Van Diemen's Land, Tasman completed only the first part of the instructions. He charted the waters from the Gulf of Carpentaria, all the way to the north-west point of the continent. In doing so, he proved that New Guinea was not joined to a southern land. He also discovered that the area known at the time as Eendrachtland was part of a large land that spread at least to the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was Tasman who named the discovered parts of the continent 'New Holland'.

Naval terms explained

Most journals from seafaring explorers of the past contain terms relating to measurement and navigation. Here are explanations for the terms latitude and longitude.

- **Latitude**: the north-south direction on Earth. Latitude is calculated by measuring the distance between the horizon and the Sun or particular stars. Early explorers used an instrument called an astrolabe to calculate their position according to latitude.
- **Longitude**: the east-west direction on Earth. Calculating longitude requires knowing the exact time at a particular location. Until the mid-1700s, longitude was virtually impossible for explorers to calculate because clocks could not account for the different time zones that ships sailed through. This changed when an Englishman named John Harrison managed to invent a timepiece that could calculate the appropriate times.