

SOLVING THE 1789 SMALLPOX MYSTERY

234 years ago, on 15 April 1789, Aboriginal people were discovered dead at a nearby cove, their bodies covered with pustulant sores. It was immediately recognised as the dreaded smallpox disease. A ten-year old boy, Nanbaree, was still alive, so he was quarantined and cared for by John White, the Chief Surgeon. White then formally adopted Nanbaree, who later circumnavigated Australia with Matthew Flinders in 1802.

Joseph Jeffries

Reports soon flooded in of Aboriginal people dead and dying, all around Sydney and beyond. On hearing the news, a First Fleet sailor Joseph Jeffries, went to the Aboriginal friends he had made when the First Fleet arrived. He helped to nurse the sick and dying, but immediately contracted the disease.

He was non-symptomatic for the usual first two weeks while the disease incubated inside him but when Jeffries broke out in pustules on 2 May 1789, he was immediately quarantined. Jeffries died in agony a week later on 9 May and was the only one of 1,400 colonists to die of the disease.

Phillip and Ross

Governor Phillip was perplexed about where the disease had suddenly come from and started investigating. However, he was immediately side-tracked by Major Robert Ross, the Lieutenant Governor of the colony and Military Commander. Ross suddenly started his rancorous argument with Phillip, by withdrawing his officers from adjudicating in civil court matters. Phillip convened a tribunal and with the support of the military officers, overruled Ross. Only one Marines Officer supported Ross and that was his second-in-command, Captain James Campbell.

This new kerfuffle was symptomatic of Ross' deep animosity toward Phillip, whom he considered weak in his treatment of the natives. By early 1789, the colonists were starving and scurvy-ridden. Aboriginal attacks were increasing and the Marine Corps were virtually out of ammunition. Ross wanted to build a stockade to defend the colony against the likelihood of native attack but Phillip refused.

Ross angrily believed this decision was contrary to their respective Letters Patent from the Crown, which gave Ross superiority over Phillip in matters of defence and war. However, Ross was now without allies, except for Campbell.

Where did the smallpox virus come from?

Having been side-tracked, what Phillip didn't get to find out, was that Surgeon White had purchased several jars of smallpox scabs at Cape Town seventeen months before, for the purpose of immunising the colonists. He had been unable to do this because of the scurvy and food shortages. The jars had then ended up in the government store at Sydney and were now unaccounted for.

The first clue on what had happened to the smallpox jars, was an event which occurred eight weeks beforehand, on 18 March 1789. This was the discovery that seven Marines Officers had been systematically robbing the store and selling the goods on the black market.

The accused officers were all duly arrested and a trial date set for 25 March. Ross and Campbell then began gathering further evidence, interviewing witnesses and doing a stocktake of the government store. Ross and Campbell discovered White's smallpox jars and immediately recognised them. Both officers had previously served in the American Indian Wars twenty years before, when General Amherst had used smallpox as a biological weapon.

How the Aboriginal people were infected with smallpox

Back then, Amherst had used a trader, who was friendly with the Indians, to distribute infected clothing and blankets but who could they use now? Then Campbell remembered that when the Fleet had first arrived fifteen months before, Joseph Jeffries, a sailor from the ship, Supply, had sought his permission to visit the local natives. Campbell was the sole officer able to authorise such leave, and had readily granted the request, because it accorded with Governor Phillips' policy of 'amity with the natives'.

Campbell subsequently noted that every time Jeffries returned from the Supply's shuttle run to Norfolk Island, he always brought presents for his native friends. How easy was this? All they had to do was to give Jeffries some smallpox-infected materials and he would do the job for them. And what luck! The Supply, with Jeffries aboard, was due back on 24 March, the day before the trial of their officers. All they had to do was to make sure Jeffries had shore leave on the day of the trial, and give him the package of infected materials.

There is of course no direct documentary evidence of Ross and Campbell finding the jars and cooking up this plot but you only have to do the arithmetic to see clearly it is what happened.

The smallpox outbreak came to notice on 15 April 1789. You are non-symptomatic for two weeks while the disease incubates, then it takes a week for you to die, so, the family had caught the disease three weeks before, which was 25 March 1789. This was the day after Joseph Jeffries had arrived back from Norfolk Island, and so was the day that he innocently delivered smallpox-infected materials to his Aboriginal friends.

There is, however, one more fact that explains why Joseph Jeffries had sought out Aboriginal friendships in the first place, and why he was also aware of appropriate cultural behaviours.

Joseph Jeffries was in fact, a Native American Algonquin Indian, who had been recruited to the First Fleet at the Rio de Janeiro stopover. He was the perfect fall-guy.