

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM LEEMAN, who visited the Western Australian coast, February-April, 1658

ABRAHAM LEEMAN van SANTWITZ was (as his full name indicates) an Englishman from the town of Sandwich, who joined the Dutch East India Company in the 17th Century, with many others from various countries.

On 1st January 1658 Leeman sailed from the Java port of Batavia (renamed later as Jakarta) as “uppersteersman” (navigator and 1st officer) on the Dutch sailing ship Waeckende Boey, which was sent with another, smaller ship, the Emeloort, to search for 68 survivors of the ship Vergulde Draeck (Gilt Dragon) which had been wrecked off the western coast of Australia (“the Southland”) in April 1656.

About 115 people lost their lives when the Vergulde Draeck went down about 7 ¼ miles south of Ledge Point, but seven survivors who took the bad news to Batavia in one of the ship’s boats reported mistakenly that their ship had sunk at Latitude 30 degrees 40 minutes South (near Green Islands).

The Waeckende Boey and the Emeloort became separated on their voyage from Batavia to the WA coast, and the Waeckende Boey came in near Rottnest Island on 23 February 1658 and then turned north. Somewhere near Yanchep, Leeman went ashore with 13 sailors in the ship’s boat to begin the search for the Vergulde Draeck castaways. They stayed ashore overnight and walked up the beach, and soon found wreckage obviously washed ashore from the shipwreck.

Leeman and the boat crew went ashore at various points as the ship and the boat sailed up the coast. The Emeloort met up with the Waeckende Boey on 28 February but the two ships were soon separated again in rough weather, which sent the Waeckende Boey down as far as Rottnest. Leeman went ashore on that island and explored it, and then the ship sailed north again to resume its search for the Vergulde Draeck survivors.

At sunset on 22 March, Leeman and the boat crew were sent ashore again despite his protests that a storm was developing. They were unable to sail through the lines of reefs about three miles offshore and were driven northward, while the Waeckende Boey sailed far out to sea in the storm. Next day Leeman and his 13 crew were blown many miles further north on to an island. (My studies indicate that this was Fisherman Island, 12 miles south of the town site of Leeman).

A couple of days later they repaired the damaged boat and sailed back south to look for their ship, but could not find it, so they went to an island to wait in case it returned for them (I believe this was Green Island). About Sunset on 28 March Leeman’s boat crew saw their ship sailing towards the island. It fired a cannon and they lit a fire ashore as a signal, but the ship did not stop. It sailed away in the darkness and continued to Batavia.

Leeman showed the 13 sailors how to use bush timber, sea lion skins and other makeshift materials to get the boat ready to sail more than 1400 miles home to Java. He rationed the water but there was not enough and some of the people died at sea during the three weeks’ voyage. Some of the sailors swam ashore and deserted on the South Java coast, and the boat was wrecked the next day.

Leeman and the three remaining loyal sailors had to start walking overland. It was another five months before they reached the Dutch East India Company settlement of Japara, east of Batavia, as four ragged wretches, almost dead.

Abraham Leeman deserves to be remembered in Australian history as a fine seaman and an extraordinary leader who was patient and kind to those with him. He was a genuine hero of our distant past.

The complete translation of Abraham Leeman’s Journal, his own account, will be included in the historical book “LEEMAN MAROONED”, by James Henderson to be published in Australia in 1981.