

THE NATIVE AMERICAN WHO SHAPED AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

More than a decade ago, when I began researching the possible origins of the mysterious Australian smallpox plague of 1789, I was faced with a seeming contradiction. Some history books said that no white man died in the plague, but other sources said that one sailor from the First Fleet had died.

However, when I drilled down to the passenger lists on the boats, I found both statements were correct. The person who died was a 22 years-old sailor, Joseph Jeffries, who had been recruited at Rio de Janeiro in August 1787 to replace one of the deserting sailors. And here is the stunning part. Jeffries was in fact a Native American Algonquin 'Red Indian' from the Great Lakes area of the United States.

How Joseph Jeffries came to be on the First Fleet is a story in itself. He was born in 1767 on Staten Island in present day New York, and when the War of Independence broke out in 1775, the Jeffries family had to align themselves with the British. At about age thirteen, Jeffries began working as a deckhand in the British Navy, and by the end of the war in 1883, he had become a fully-fledged sailor.

However, with the British defeat there was no future for him in the now United States of America. Harsh retribution was handed out by the Patriots to the Loyalists, so Jeffries, along with two brothers, fled to New Brunswick in Canada, which gratefully was still in Algonquin Country.

From there, Jeffries became a merchant seaman on the Atlantic seaboard, and happened to be at Rio when the First Fleet arrived. Due to desertions, Jeffries was offered a promotion to Able Seaman, so he happily joined the crew of Supply, which was the fastest boat in the fleet.

During the fleet's final stopover in Cape Town in October 1787, the Chief Surgeon John White, purchased several bottles of smallpox scabs, with the intention of later immunising the 1,400 colonists against the disease.

On arriving at Sydney Cove in January 1788, an order was posted that all movement outside the settlement, had to be approved by one officer, Captain James Campbell. In the initial friendly mingling of local Aboriginal people with the colonists, Jeffries found that he shared cultural similarities with them, so he applied for and received permission to visit his new friends.

Jeffries was however often absent from Sydney Cove, because his ship Supply made regular runs between Sydney and Norfolk Island. So, whenever Jeffries arrived back, he would immediately visit his local friends. In doing so he would also have followed their shared cultural protocol of bringing gifts.

Despite relationships between Aboriginal people and the other colonists having deteriorated markedly by early 1789, Jeffries continued to enjoy a close friendship. In fact, the general situation had become so bad, that the Lieutenant Governor, Major Robert Ross, feared an Aboriginal attack was imminent.

For the previous six months, the colonists had been scurvy-ridden and starving, and the Marines were virtually out of ammunition. Feared an Aboriginal attack, Ross recommended to Governor Phillip that a stockade be built immediately. When Phillip then refused, Ross was livid. He considered that his own Letters Patent gave him clear superiority over Phillip in matters of defence and war.

It was at this point of seeming constitutional crisis, that Major Ross and his Second in Command Captain Campbell, did a stocktake of the government store, and discovered Surgeon White's bottles of smallpox scabs. Ross and Campbell knew immediately what they were and that they could now solve the crisis. Both men had previously served in the North American Indian Wars, when a trader had been used to distribute smallpox infected clothing to the unsuspecting Indians. But who could they use?

Campbell then remembered that he had given Jeffries, the Red Indian sailor, permission to visit local Aboriginal and every time he returned from Norfolk Island, he always took gifts to them. As luck would have it, the Supply was due back from Norfolk Island on 24th March 1789. So, all they had to do was carefully infect some clothing and blankets, give them to Jeffries, and he would unsuspectingly pass them on.

Of course, none of this is recorded as any sort of direct admissions, but it is nonetheless the inescapable conclusion from the following facts. Smallpox broke out in the Aboriginal community on 15th April 1789. Jeffries immediately went to nurse and comfort his friends.

Two weeks later, on 2nd May, Jeffries became symptomatic with smallpox and died on 9th May 1789. If that three-week incubation and death period is taken from the date of first outbreak on 15th April, you arrive at 25th March 1789 as the date of infection. This is precisely the day after Jeffries had arrived back at Sydney Cove on the Supply and unsuspectingly delivered the infected materials to his friends.