

The Zong Massacre – A Summary

Posted on **November 29, 2011** by **Rupert Colley**, from **History In An Hour**

On 29 November 1781, Captain Luke Collingwood of the British ship, Zong, ordered one-third of his cargo to be thrown overboard. That cargo was human – 133 African slaves bound for Jamaica. His motive – to collect the insurance. The case was brought to court – not for murder, but against the insurers who refused to pay up. This is the cruel story of the Zong Massacre.

The Slave Ship, Zong

On 6 September 1781, the *Zong*, a slave ship, left the island of São Tomé, off the west coast of Africa, bound for Jamaica. The ship was cruelly overcrowded, carrying 442 Africans, destined to become slaves, accompanied by 17 crew. The human cargo was manacled and packed so tightly, to have no room to move. But for the captain, Luke Collingwood, the more Africans he could squeeze in, the greater the margin of profit for both the ship's owners and himself.

For Collingwood, previously a ship's surgeon, this was his first and last assignment as captain. Planning to retire, he hoped for a generous bounty to help him in his retirement. The greater the number of fit slaves he delivered to Jamaica, the greater his share.

Captain Collingwood's decision

But by mid-November, the inexperienced Collingwood found himself in the mid-Atlantic, unable to navigate out of the calm winds of the Doldrums. The slaves, suffering from malnutrition, dysentery, scurvy and disease, began to die. By 28 November, 60 had died, along with seven crew members. Many more were falling sick. Collingwood began to panic – the delivery of dead slaves would earn the shipowners nothing. If, however, the Africans were somehow lost at sea, then the shipowners' insurance would cover the loss at £30 per head.



So Collingwood, himself suffering from fever, had an idea. Having discussed it with his crew, he made an unimaginably cruel, but to his mind, logical decision. Rather than allow the sick slaves to die on board and be rendered worthless, he would throw them overboard – and hence claim on the insurance. First Mate, James Kelsall, protested but was overruled. At some point during the trip, Kelsall had been suspended from duty but we do not know whether or not it was for this act of protestation (on arrival in Jamaica, the ship's log had conveniently disappeared).

Thus, on 29 November, 54 sick slaves, mainly women and children, were dragged from below deck, unshackled (after all, why waste good

manacles?) and heaved from the ship into the ocean. The following day, more were murdered. In the end, Collingwood had thrown 133 slaves to their deaths. Many struggled and the crew had to tie iron balls to their ankles. Another ten slaves threw themselves overboard and in what Collingwood described as an act of defiance.



The ship finally arrived at its destination on 22 December 1781 – a trip that normally took 60 days had taken Collingwood 108. There were still 208 slaves on board, sold for an average of £36 each.

The Zong Massacre was depicted by the artist, JMW Turner, in his 1840 painting, *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*.

Horrid brutality

On arriving back in Liverpool, the ship's owner, James Gregson, duly made his claim – £4,000 for the loss of jettisoned 'cargo'. The case went to court – not for the murder of 133 helpless Africans, but over who was liable for the costs. Collingwood made the devious claim that his actions had been necessitated by his concerns over the lack of water. He claimed to have had insufficient water to maintain the lives of his crew and the healthier slaves. First Mate Kelsall, who described the episode as a 'horrid brutality', spoke out against this falsehood, and sure enough it transpired that on arrival in Jamaica there were still some 430 gallons of water to spare on board the ship. Therefore, the insurers argued, it was for Gregson to stump the bill, not them. The decision, however, went Gregson's way.

'The same as if wood had been thrown overboard'

The insurers appealed and the case came before the court for a second time. By now, in May 1783, Collingwood had died (he died only three days after the ship had arrived in Jamaica) and the case had become a scandal of epic proportions in Britain. Olaudah Equiano, a former slave who had bought his freedom and settled in London, brought the case to the attention of leading English abolitionist, Granville Sharp. Sharp wanted to bring forward a case of murder but the judge, Lord Mansfield, brushed aside his attempt, asserting:

'What is this claim that human people have been thrown overboard? This is a case of chattels or goods. Blacks are goods and property; it is madness to accuse these well-serving honourable men of murder. They acted out of necessity and in the most appropriate manner for the cause. The late Captain Collingwood acted in the interest of his ship to protect the safety of his crew. To question the judgement of an experienced well-travelled captain held in the highest regard is one of folly, especially when talking of slaves. The case is the same as if wood had been thrown overboard.'

Sharp may have failed in his attempts to seek justice but over the coming years he used it to lobby Parliament and the church, and it certainly increased the call for abolition. The Abolition Society, founded in 1787, used the Zong Massacre as the prime example of the slave trade's depravity. Finally, in 1807, Great Britain abolished the slave trade.

But, as a cruel postscript to the Zong Massacre, the practice of throwing slaves overboard did not end with the abolition of the slave trade. British seamen who persisted with the now illegal trade were, if caught, liable to a fine of £100 for every slave found aboard ship. The Royal Navy set up a squadron whose task was to patrol the coast of West Africa capturing ships carrying slaves. Captains on the slave ships, realising they were about to be caught, would throw slaves overboard to reduce the fines they had to pay.

Post Reading Questions:

1. What was the name of the ship? Who was on board? Where was it going and why?
2. What unexpected problems did the ship and its crew encounter during the voyage?
3. What action did the captain take to "solve" these problems? What motivated him to do this?
4. Describe the lawsuit that follows the voyage. What two parties were involved in the case? What did the slavers claim? Who was disputing it?
5. Abolitionist Granville Sharp attempted to charge the crew with murder, but judge Lord Mansfield rejected this attempt. What was the judge's reasoning for this rejection?
6. How do you think this case advanced the cause of abolition?