The Maritime Museum of San Diego’s latest exhibit, Enlightened Voyages: Epic Journeys that Changed the Pacific, tells the story of the events that led up to the founding of the Spanish port of San Diego in 1769. This history has been presented many times in both scholarly and popular works. Visitors to the Serra Museum and Mission San Diego de Alcalá will find it engagingly interpreted at these historic sites. What makes Enlightened Voyages different from the displays found at local interpretative centers? The Maritime Museum’s aim is to present – in keeping with its mission of preserving and recounting San Diego’s seafaring history – a story that focuses not so much on territorial expansion embodied in the missions and presidios of Upper California, but rather focuses on the vital role of vessels and seafarers in one of Spain’s last attempts at imperial expansion in the eighteenth century.

Editor’s note: This overview of the Maritime Museum’s new exhibit has been prepared by Dr. Kevin Sheehan. The following pages represent a selection of narrative panels currently aboard the HMS Surprise. Collectively, they tell the story of two historically significant ships, the HMS Dolphin and the Spanish packet boat San Carlos, in the founding of San Diego.

The founding of San Diego, the first of the Spanish settlements in Upper California, is closely tied to events that occurred halfway around the world in a Europe torn apart by dynastic rivalries. The Bourbon rulers of Spain maintained close family ties with their French counterparts throughout much of the eighteenth century. Invariably, the Spanish were drawn into the conflicts that periodically erupted between the French and other European powers, most notably the British. Monumental among these was the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), a conflict for supremacy in Europe that was also fought in the Americas. At the end of the war Britain emerged as the dominant European maritime power after soundly defeating the French on land and at sea, as well as effectively neutralizing the Spanish. Chastened by a mediocre performance during the hostilities, Spain now set out on a radical overhaul of her imperial defenses. These outcomes would have profound implications for the Pacific; it was in this oceanic arena that British expansion and Spanish counter strategies would be played out during the remainder of the eighteenth century.

From this perspective it appeared likely that Spain and England would find themselves in a direct competition in the Pacific that would inevitably lead to violent conflict. This, in fact, did not happen. Instead, what followed from the mid-1760s through the mid-1770s was one of the most important decades in the history of European influence in the Pacific. This was an era characterized, for the most part, by empire building through peaceful scientific investigation rather than armed conquest. The exploratory voyages
in the Pacific sponsored by European rulers resulted in a broad exchange of knowledge between scholars inspired by the philosophical methods of the Enlightenment that valued careful observation and rational conclusions.

The ship that began this extraordinary decade of maritime reconnaissance was a British Royal Navy sixth-rate frigate, HMS *Dolphin*. In 1764, the *Dolphin* set out on a voyage that reflected Britain’s new global ambitions. Her commander, Captain John Byron, carried with him secret instructions that specifically forbade antagonizing Spanish authorities. Byron was ordered to reconnoiter the coast of New Albion, a region corresponding roughly to Northern California. Francis Drake had claimed this territory for England in 1579, but it had rarely been visited by European vessels since that time. Byron was also instructed to seek out evidence of a “Northwest Passage” linking the Atlantic with the Pacific, believed to exist somewhere to the north of New Albion. The discovery of this sea route would have had enormous implications for commerce, by opening the North Atlantic world to the emporia of East Asia through a more direct sea voyage. Once in the Pacific, however, Byron abandoned this search, deciding that a speedy circumnavigation was more in the interests of his vessel and crew. The quest for the Northwest Passage would continue to draw British, Spanish, and French ships to the Pacific Northwest throughout the remainder of the century.

No sooner had the *Dolphin* returned to England in 1766, than she was resupplied, placed under the command of Captain Samuel Wallis, and sent to the Pacific a second time. The official instructions were different for this voyage. Wallis was ordered to seek out the elusive southern continent – *Terra Australis* – a quest that had fascinated European navigators since the sixteenth century. Wallis found it almost impossible to make headway against the westerly winds in the southern reaches of the Pacific, and so the *Dolphin* was forced to sail farther to the north than had been initially planned. On June 18, 1767, the weary travelers sighted what they believed to be the mountainous peaks of the southern continent. In fact, this turned out to be the island of Tahiti. Thus began a series of encounters between Europeans and the Tahitians that would be idealized in artistic and narrative form in subsequent decades.

The *Dolphin*’s two circumnavigations, while an achievement in their own right, fell short of the British Admiralty’s initial ambitions. The Northwest Passage and *Terra Australis* remained, for the moment, elusive. Nevertheless, these voyages would have a profound impact on other European powers, most notably the Spanish who considered the Pacific their exclusive domain. The reaction of the Spanish crown was swift and decisive, evidence of the effectiveness of previous reforms enacted to better organize colonial government. In 1772, authorities in the Viceroyalty of Peru sent the *Aguila* to protect Spanish interests in Tahiti. Three years earlier in New Spain, the crown’s Inspector General José de Gálvez personally oversaw an ambitious plan to secure the Pacific Northwest from encroachment by other rival powers.

Gálvez’s plan involved sending four expeditions – two by sea and two by land – to found a series of permanent Spanish settlements in Upper California. The voyage of the Spanish packet boat *San Carlos*, the first vessel to set out from La Paz in Baja California to establish a Spanish port at San Diego, is a story of both tenacity and tragedy. Buffeted by adverse winds and seas, and carrying charts and sailing instructions that erroneously placed San Diego much farther to the north than its actual location, the *San Carlos* underwent a harrowing voyage of 110 days before anchoring at the entrance to San Diego Bay, on the night of May 1, 1769. Sickness devastated the weakened survivors. Within a few weeks dozens of the passengers and crew of the *San Carlos* would lie buried a few yards from the shore.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the Spanish maintained their position in San Diego, and also succeeded in sending exploratory parties farther north to Monterey and San Francisco. By the end of the eighteenth century, with their overseas possessions still largely intact, the Spanish appeared to have forestalled the advance of their rivals in the Pacific Northwest.

In the meantime, the Pacific yielded up many of its most closely guarded geographic and hydrographic secrets thanks to a series of European navigators who followed in the wake of the *Dolphin*. Painting by Gordon Miller
By the middle of the eighteenth century, European interest in global exploration had reached new heights. The principal European maritime powers – Spain, Britain, and France – ordered a series of vessels to the distant corners of the Pacific Ocean. Russia too sent explorers eastward across Siberia to survey the North Pacific for the possibility of tribute and trade. The motivation for these voyages was not simply to lay claim to unknown regions. Explorers educated in the principles and methods of the Enlightenment saw these journeys as unique opportunities to study nature through scientific research. The new knowledge thus acquired was based on careful observation and its findings shared through the publication of charts and scientific papers.

Rulers Monarchs and governments, influenced by the philosophy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, saw voyages of exploration as a way of building overseas empires based on useful knowledge from the natural world.

Books, Charts and Drawings Observing, measuring, recording, and publishing brought the knowledge acquired from scientific voyages to a broader audience.

Indigenous peoples Encounters with the peoples of the Pacific fascinated scientists, missionaries, and their royal patrons. Indigenous knowledge, hospitality, and natural resources were highly sought after by European voyagers.
In the eighteenth century, European rulers, scientists, and explorers joined forces in a deliberate effort to reach a new understanding of the Pacific Ocean and its bountiful resources.

**Explorers** The success of long oceanic voyages depended on the services of expert and innovative mariners.

**Scientists** Scholars on board the vessels of exploration used them as floating laboratories, and eagerly gathered information on plants, animals, minerals, and other peoples.

**Ships** Experience taught mariners that the most suitable ships for voyages of exploration were sturdy vessels with shallow drafts and good storage.
The Epic Voyages of HMS Dolphin

On April 9, 1765, the British Royal Navy frigate HMS Dolphin entered the Pacific Ocean and began a race for empire that would ultimately lead to the founding of Spanish California.

The 1764-1766 Voyage

The Dolphin’s commander Captain John Byron carried orders to explore the coast of California, and to determine if a navigable waterway – the fabled Northwest Passage – did indeed connect the Pacific Ocean with the North Atlantic. Byron and the Dolphin would never venture as far as the Pacific Northwest. However, the adventures of the Dolphin and her crew would cause the Spanish to reconsider their strategy in the Pacific.

The 1766-1768 Voyage

Captain Samuel Wallis was placed in command of the Dolphin in 1766 and ordered to find the continent believed to exist somewhere in the South Pacific. Like Byron before him, Wallis found the sailing conditions in the Pacific to be extremely difficult, and he was forced to abandon the search for Terra Australis. Instead he came across the island of Tahiti. When Wallis submitted his report of the voyage to the British Admiralty, it contained precise details of Tahiti’s latitude and longitude. The British Royal Society decided that Tahiti would be an ideal location to observe the Transit of Venus, and in 1768 sent the Endeavour, under Captain James Cook, to visit the island and conduct a series of scientific observations.
Left: This map of the Americas shows clearly the great advantages in finding a new route from the North Sea (the Atlantic) to the South Sea (the Pacific). By avoiding the treacherous voyage through the Strait of Magellan or around Cape Horn, the British stood to gain a more direct route to the riches of Asia and effectively challenge Spain’s monopoly in the Pacific.

Right: Captain Byron was given secret instructions to seek out New Albion, a region corresponding to Northern California, and claimed for England by Francis Drake almost two centuries earlier in 1579. This detail from a map made by the Dutch cartographer Jodocus Hondius in 1589 clearly shows the reason why Spanish authorities were so alarmed by British interest in New Albion. If British claims had been backed up by an attempt to settle the region, the security of the Spanish Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico) would have been severely threatened.

Right: Captain Samuel Wallis probably consulted this 1744 chart of the western portion of Australia – then known as New Holland – before setting out in search of Terra Australis in 1766. The chart is the product of information gained from seventeenth-century voyaging by Dutch mariners. It was assumed by many geographers that the Australian continent extended much further to the east.

Left: Geographic theories from the sixteenth century on suggested that a vast continent extended over much of the South Pacific. This continent, it was believed, “balanced” the land masses of Europe and Asia. This theory clearly influenced Jodocus Hondius in his 1589 world map portraying European voyages of discovery. The theory was still very much in vogue when the Dolphin put to sea in 1764.
The isolation of Spain's possessions in the Pacific from other European settlements and trade routes had long permitted the Spanish to maintain a minimal military presence in the region. The voyages of the *Dolphin* began a new era of European interest in the Pacific, and caused Spain to reassess its strategic priorities. This led to the formulation of a two-fold plan to increase the security of Spanish imperial claims. First, the Viceroy of Peru sent an expedition to Tahiti to establish a permanent Spanish mission in the islands. Second, the Viceroy of Mexico and Charles III’s Inspector General, José de Gálvez, organized expeditions by land and sea to settle Upper California. In 1769 three packet boats, the *San Carlos*, the *San Antonio*, and the *San José*, set out to found a Spanish port at San Diego.

The *Dolphin*'s voyages, two centuries of sporadic British forays into the Pacific like those of Francis Drake (1578-1579), Thomas Cavendish (1587), and George Anson (1741), had focused on capturing Spanish galleons laden with treasure and raiding prosperous Spanish ports in the Americas. By contrast, the *Dolphin*'s commanders – John Byron and Samuel Wallis – received orders to avoid antagonizing Spanish authorities. For the first time, the British came to the Pacific with the aim of discovery rather than plunder.
### The Dolphin at a glance

| Design: | British Royal Navy 1745 Establishment |
| Shipyard: | Woolwich Dockyard, United Kingdom |
| Laid down: | August 3, 1748 |
| Launched: | May 1, 1751 |
| Commissioned: | June, 1752 |
| Class: | Sixth-rate frigate |
| Length: | 113 feet (34 meters) on the gun deck |
| Beam: | 32 feet 1 inch (9.78 meters) |
| Tons burthen: | 511 long tons |
| Compliment: | 160 officers, marines, and crew |
| Armament: | lower deck: 2 x 9 pounders |
| | upper deck: 20 x 9 pounders |
| | quarter deck: 2 x 3 pounders |
| Broken up: | January, 1777 |

### How the Dolphin compares to other Royal Navy vessels:

- **First-Rater**
- **Second-Rater**
- **Third-Rater**
- **Fourth-Rater**
- **Fifth-Rater**
- **Sixth-Rater – HMS Dolphin**

### The Dolphin’s Claims to Fame

- The first circumnavigation to take less than two years, (June 1764 - May 1766).
- The first ship to circumnavigate the globe twice.
- The first recorded European vessel to visit the island of Tahiti.
- The second ship in the British Navy to be copper-plated below the waterline.

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**HMS Dolphin, Artist: Bruce Dragoo.**

**Woolwich Dockyards where the Dolphin was constructed.**

**A Royal Navy sixth-rate frigate, similar to HMS Dolphin, on the stocks.**
**The Captains**

**John Byron** (1723-1786) was forty years of age when he assumed command of HMS *Dolphin* in 1764. Byron had first joined the British Navy as a midshipman in 1740. That year he sailed on the *Wager* in a fleet commanded by George Anson, with express orders to harass Spanish shipping and ports in the Pacific. A violent storm wrecked the *Wager* on the coast of Chile. Spanish authorities eventually captured and repatriated Byron and a small group of survivors. The author Patrick O’Brian fictionalized Byron’s adventures on the *Wager* in his 1959 novel *The Unknown Shore*. Critics suggest that Byron’s character was used as a prototype for Jack Aubrey in later O’Brian novels.

During the Seven Years’ War, Byron took command of a squadron sent to destroy the fortifications at Louisbourg. In 1760, ships under his command defeated a French flotilla at the Battle of Restigouche, thereby ending the last French attempt to resupply their forces in the Americas.

After the *Dolphin’s* first circumnavigation (1764-1766), Byron was appointed British governor of Newfoundland. He was subsequently promoted to rear admiral and later vice admiral. He fought against the French during the American War of Independence.

**Samuel Wallis** (1728-1795) was born near Camelford, Cornwall. Wallis entered the British Royal Navy at a young age and served as a junior officer during the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748). He was made lieutenant in 1748. Wallis was placed in command of the *Dolphin* in 1766 and ordered to seek out the continental landmass known as *Terra Australis*, which European geographers believed existed somewhere in the South Pacific. Like Byron before him, Wallis failed to achieve the objectives set by the British Admiralty. Nevertheless, he is credited with the European discovery of the island of Tahiti. He also supplied invaluable information to James Cook prior to Cook’s departure for the South Sea in 1768. Following the *Dolphin’s* second circumnavigation (1766-1768), Wallis was placed in command of a number of British warships, until named a Commissioner of the Navy in 1782 and again in 1787.
HMS *Dolphin’s* arrival at Tahiti in 1767 began a new era of European interest in the Pacific. For British, French and Spanish explorers, the island now came to represent an earthly paradise.

On June 18, 1767, the voyagers on the *Dolphin* observed a high cloud-covered mountain on the horizon. At first they assumed it was part of the mysterious Southern Continent, *Terra Australis*, that they had been sent to find and explore. George Robertson, master of the ship, remarked in his journal: “…we now supposed we saw the long wished for Southern Continent, which has been often talked of, but never before seen by any Europeans.” The land in fact proved to be the island of Tahiti.

Much of the European fascination with the Pacific in the last decades of the eighteenth century can be attributed to the glowing accounts of Tahiti’s natural beauty and its people’s apparently idyllic lifestyle as written by officers on the *Dolphin* in 1767.

“…The country had the most beautiful appearance its possible to imagine… The interior part of the country is very mountainous but there are beautiful valleys between the mountains. From the foot of the mountains halfway up the country appears to be all fine pasture land, except a few places which seemed to be plowed or dug up for planting or sowing some sort of seed… This appears to be the most populous country I ever saw. The whole shore side was lined with men, women and children all the way that we sailed along.”


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“It is impossible to describe the beautiful prospects we beheld in this charming spot. The verdure is as fine as that of England. There is great plenty of live stock, and it abounds with all the choicest productions of the earth.”

Captain Samuel Wallis's description of the island of Tahiti, 1767.
The Dolphin’s second circumnavigation (1766-1768) put Tahiti on European charts of the Pacific for the first time. Tales of the hospitality and idyllic lifestyle of the island’s inhabitants blended with European philosophers’ idealized concepts of the qualities of “natural man.” Naively, in the European imagination, Tahitian society became an example of an innocent and uncomplicated society.

The French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville first sighted Tahiti on April 22, 1768, less than ten months after the island was claimed for the British crown by Samuel Wallis. Unaware of the Dolphin’s visit, Bougainville drew up an Act of Possession for France. He named the island La Nouvelle Cythère, after the Mediterranean island of Kithira where, according to Greek mythology, the goddess of love Aphrodite was said to have risen from the sea. Bougainville wrote of his brief visit to Tahiti: “Several times I went on inland walks. I felt as though I had been transported to the Garden of Eden… Everywhere reigned hospitality, peace, joy, and every appearance of happiness.”

Trained and talented artists, whose task was to record not only the exotic landscape of the South Seas, but also the newly encountered societies and their cultures that so fascinated eighteenth-century Europeans, regularly traveled on later voyages into the Pacific. The artist John Webber, present on Cook’s third voyage (1776-1779), provided a glimpse of Tahitian society suitably censored for upper-class English sensibilities.
Encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples in the Pacific during the last half of the eighteenth century were idealized in the concept of the “Noble Savage” constructed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. In reality, these encounters were governed less by Enlightened principles and more by the pragmatic need to secure resources. The violence enacted by European voyagers against island inhabitants in the Pacific took a number of forms. Initially, the arrival of a strange vessel may well have been welcomed by indigenous peoples. Over time the demands made by the voyagers on what were essentially limited resources of food and water often led to resentment and resistance. European voyagers sometimes kidnapped islanders to ensure that their foraging parties were left unmolested. The theft of items from European ships and shore parties was frequently repaid with reprisals intended to cause fear. Women on the islands were sometimes subjected to sexual violence as well.

Diseases carried by Europeans to the Pacific also had a devastating effect. In 1768, Captain Cook estimated Tahiti’s population at 200,000. By 1810 it had dropped to less than 8,000.

The clash in 1767 between the British and the Tahitians depicted below is arguably one of the most dramatic demonstrations of indigenous resistance to European encroachment in the Pacific, as well as one of the most brutal European responses to a perceived threat.

“At this time the whole bay was all lined round with men, women and children, to see the onset which was now near at hand…in a few seconds of time all our decks were full of great and small stones and several of our men cut and bruised. This was so sudden and unexpected by the most of us, that we were some time before we could find out the cause. We then found leniency would not do, and therefore applied the great guns and gave them a few round and grape shot, which struck such terror among the poor unhappy crowd that it would require the pen of Milton to describe…”

George Robertson, Journal, HMS Dolphin, Tahiti, June 24, 1767

The *Dolphin* fires her guns at approaching canoes with devastating effect. Following a series of bloody encounters like this, the Tahitians sued for peace, resistance gave way to hospitality, and trading began.
In the last decades of the eighteenth century, Spain set into motion a broad-ranging renewal of its society and government. Reform of the Spanish Navy and a rejuvenation of colonial

The powerful Spanish fleet at anchor in Havana during the Seven Years’ War.

A New Navy for Spain

The military reforms under the enlightened Bourbon monarchs enabled the Spanish to react swiftly to English incursions into the Pacific Ocean. An Enlightened education for her naval officers, backed up by an aggressive shipbuilding program, gave Spain one of the largest European navies. These policies would be put to the test with the renewed interest of other European powers in the Pacific.
possessions were key factors in this program of modernization. By the late 1760s, Spain was stronger and more confident than at any time previously in the eighteenth century.

### An Enlightened Monarch’s Ambitions

The splendor of the Court of Charles III of Spain is summed up in this painting by Luis Paret y Alcazár, c. 1788. The king dines alone, surrounded by his attendants and courtiers. As a servant kneels to present him with the next dish, his favorite dog sits expectantly. Considered one of the “Enlightened Monarchs” of the eighteenth century, Charles presided over a vast empire. His government enacted a series of measures to streamline bureaucracy, improve the economy, reform the military, and reassert territorial claims in the Americas.

Right: The Santíssima Trinidad, a masterpiece of Spanish naval architecture, was one of the largest warships ever built in the eighteenth century. Along with dozens of other vessels constructed in Havana in the eighteenth century, she was evidence of the strength of Spanish naval renewal.

Below: Charles III’s reorganization of the Spanish military extended to colonial outposts in the Americas and the Philippines. Part of the reform program included sending well-trained Spanish officers to places like the Philippines and California, in the hope that their professionalism would raise the standards of local militias. Elaborate uniforms were designed to increase pride in the military forces, and bring them in line with current European standards of military dress.
The Spanish Plan

Spanish authorities in New Spain and Peru acted with determination to counter the challenge posed by an increased British naval presence in the Pacific.

The Spanish response to the arrival of HMS Dolphin in Tahiti in 1787 manifested itself in a number of initiatives. In the South Pacific, authorities in Peru sent an expedition to Tahiti to assert Spanish claims to the islands. In Mexico, the Spanish developed an ambitious plan for the security of the Pacific through the colonization of Upper California.

José de Gálvez: Mastermind of the Expedition to California

José de Gálvez was born in the province of Málaga, Spain, in 1720. After rising through the ranks of the Spanish bureaucracy, he was sent by Charles III to Mexico in 1765 as Inspector General. Gálvez’s mission was to assist in putting the king’s ambitious program of renewal – known as the Bourbon reforms – into practice. Gálvez oversaw the expulsion of the Jesuits from Mexico, implemented financial reforms to increase the Crown’s revenues, and reorganized the defenses for the northern borderlands of Spanish settlements in Mexico. This last project would result in sending a series of overland and seaborne expeditions to settle Upper California in 1769.

The Plan

Gálvez believed it was essential to establish Spain’s legal claim to its northwest frontier through actual settlement, rather than through symbolic acts of possession. Effective possession would be taken through founding military establishments known as presidios. The Spanish initially planned to build two such presidios – one in San Diego, and the other in Monterey.

The presidios would protect the harbors at Monterey and San Diego, thus providing secure ports of call for galleons that traveled annually between Manila and Acapulco. The garrisons of these presidios would also protect the chain of missions that were to be founded by the Franciscan Order under the guidance of Fray Junípero Serra. The missionaries were charged with converting the indigenous populations of Upper California, and introducing them to the “civilizing” influence of Hispanic culture and technology. In theory, too, the missionaries would protect the indigenous populations from any violence on the part of future Spanish colonists.
The San Carlos at a Glance

**Design:** Adapted by Francisco Pacheco, a shipwright from Veracruz in New Spain (colonial Mexico) from contemporary designs of Iberian packet boats.

**Shipyard:** Río Santiago, north of the port of San Blas, west coast of New Spain.

**Launched:** Fall 1767.

**Purpose:** Troop carrier and transport.

**Configuration:** Snow-rigged, two-masted ship.

**Length of keel:** 64 feet.

**Length on deck:** 79 feet.

**Beam:** 23 feet.

**Tonnage:** 193 tons.

**Compliment:** Varied greatly depending on available crew. On the 1769 expedition: captain, first mate, pilot, twenty-three crew.

**Armament:** At least 6 guns on the upper deck.

**Fate:** After ferrying supplies from San Blas to the new Spanish settlements in Upper California for a decade, the San Carlos was sent across the Pacific to the Philippines in 1779 to assist Spanish forces in the event of war with the English. She was either wrecked or broken up at an unknown date.

The Plans of the San Carlos by Raymond Aker.
The Perilous Voyage

The voyage of the San Carlos, the first of the packet boats to set out on the expedition to Upper California, became a nightmare for its passengers and crew as they battled for 110 days to reach a safe harbor in San Diego.

An Auspicious Beginning

The voyage of the San Carlos began with great fanfare. At La Paz in Baja California, the organizer of the expedition, Spanish Inspector General José de Gálvez, went to great lengths to ensure that the packet boat was both seaworthy and well-stocked with supplies and provisions. Gálvez even assisted personally in carrying stores on board. On Sunday morning, January 9, 1769, the Inspector General gave a resounding speech to the assembled members of the expedition. Fray Junípero Serra blessed the San Carlos and all on board. The San Carlos weighed anchor at midnight.

A Battle with the Elements

Within a few days, things began to go wrong. Attempting to sail north in mid-winter, the San Carlos encountered contrary winds and unexpectedly heavy seas. These conditions caused the water casks stowed in the hold to rupture, with disastrous consequences. Her captain, Vicente Vila, was forced to search for a safe anchorage along the arid coast of Baja California to procure fresh water. On the island of Cedros, Vila and his companions eventually found brackish water – too salty to be healthy. The commander of the detachment of soldiers of the Free Company on board the San Carlos, Pedro Fages, assisted in collecting it in barrels. Meanwhile, anchoring close to the shore had proven so dangerous that Vila was forced to keep the San Carlos sailing off shore for a week while he waited for enough water to be brought on board.

A Survivor’s Words

“We entered the port of San Diego 110 days after leaving La Paz: but the crew, and the troops aboard – whose fatigue, in so extended and painful a voyage, and in the rawest of winter, could not be less than excessive – arrived in a deplorable state. Scurvy had strongly infected all without exception. Upon entering San Diego, two men were dead of sickness, and most of the seamen found themselves prostrate in their beds. Only four sailors remained on foot and rallied, helped by the soldiers, to trim and furl the sails and perform other manual tasks.”

Journal of the Spanish Army Engineer, Miguel de Costansó, 1770.

Mistaken Cartography

Despite these difficulties, Vila and his companions forged ahead with their voyage, determined to reach San Diego. Unfortunately, the sea charts and sailing instructions they had as their guides proved to be dangerously flawed. Believing San Diego to be situated farther north along the coast than its actual location, Captain Vila took the packet boat far out into the Pacific in search of better sailing conditions. Buffeted by strong winds and heavy seas they eventually anchored in San Pedro Bay, near modern-day Los Angeles. The San Carlos then sailed south for San Diego. The San Antonio, the second packet boat of the expedition, had departed La Paz a month after the San Carlos, but arrived in San Diego eighteen days earlier.
Serra’s Assessment

“The serious disaster on board the San Carlos has been due to two things: The first, because of the poor barrels from which the water had leaked out without being seen, so that from four barrels, not enough water was had to fill one, so they had to come to land to obtain water and what they found was not good and from drinking it the men were soon taken sick. The second reason was that, by an error in which we all were, both His Excellency the Viceroy as well as all the rest, this port was supposed to be at latitude 33 or 34 degrees, north. So at least the authors say, one stating one thing and others another. For this reason the command had been to put well out to sea and to sail north as far as latitude 34, and then to make for the land in search for the port. But as, in reality, the latitude of this place is only 32 degrees, 34 minutes, according to the observations just taken here by the captains, it will be seen that the ship went too far north and when they looked for the port they could not find it. For this reason the voyage was prolonged, and as the crew were already very sick, the cold climate affected them…”

Letter of Fray Junípero Serra to Fray Francisco Palou, San Diego, July 3, 1769.
San Diego Founded

By mid-1769 the survivors of the expeditions sent by land and sea to establish Spanish settlements in Upper California had united in San Diego. From here they would proceed north to found a chain of presidios and missions and create Spain's final imperial frontier.

Above: On May 13, 1769, from a high mesa just south of the present border between the United States and Mexico, the first of the overland expeditions from Lower California caught sight of the San Carlos and the San Antonio riding at anchor in San Diego Bay.

Left: The founding of the Mission at San Diego, July 16, 1769.

"Fray Junípero Serra performed the act of founding the mission at San Diego with a High Mass and the other usual ceremonies… The date was July 16, 1769, on which day we Spaniards celebrate the Triumph of the Most Holy Cross… In this faith and with zeal for the conversion of souls, the Venerable Fray Junípero raised the standard of the Holy Cross, setting it up on the spot which he considered most suitable for the establishment of a town, and within sight of the port."

Fray Francisco Palou, Life of Fray Junípero Serra.

In 1785, the Spanish white ensign was changed to a new red and gold design. From that point on, this new flag was flown by all Spanish vessels in the Pacific.

The principal ports and harbors of Spain's new frontier.