A fore-and-aft rigged galease like the one seized by
Tolleif Thomsen and his shipmates during the Napoleonic Wars.

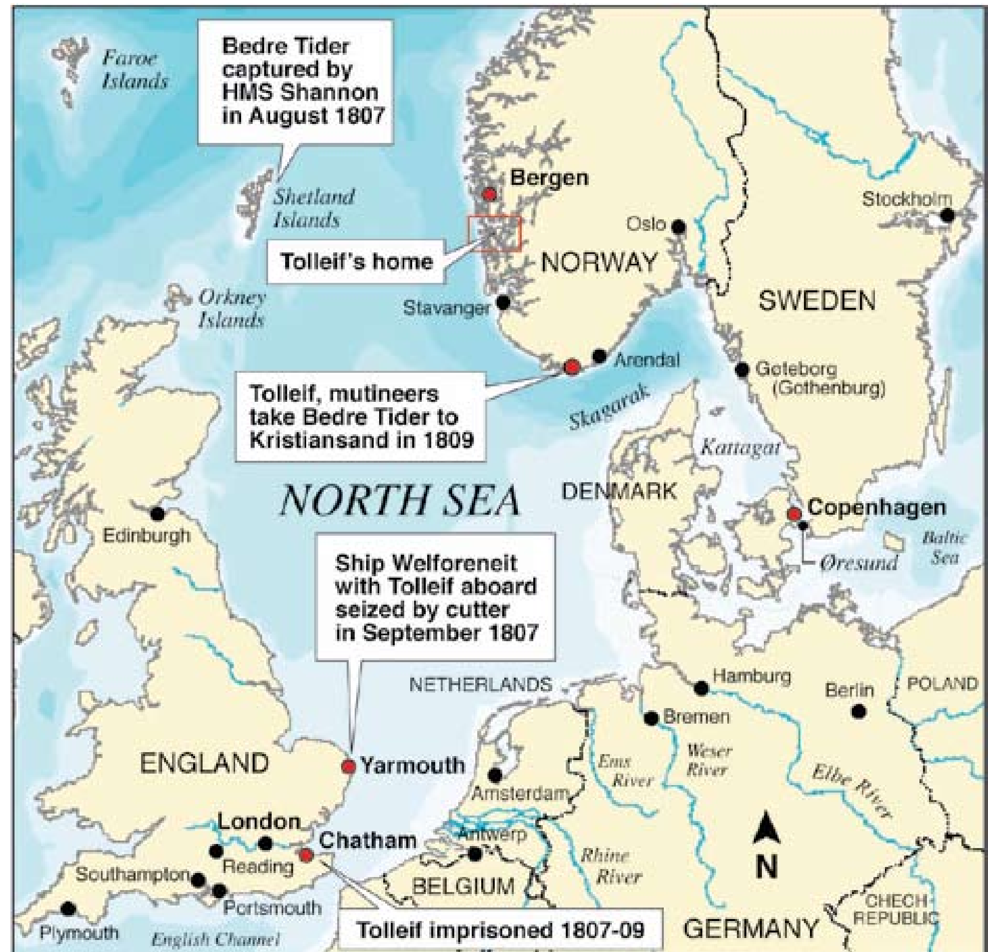
UPDATED

Tolleif Taken

The story of our ancestor's capture, imprisonment and escape from the British during the Napoleonic Wars has been confirmed. Roger Fossum discovered records showing when Tolleif Thomsen was taken, where he was held and when he was released.

Tolleif Taken

A NORWEGIAN SAILOR IN THE NAPOLEONIC WARS



The year 2007 marked the 200th anniversary of a key event in Thomsen family history – the capture and imprisonment of Tolleif Thomsen in 1807 by the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars.

According to the old family story, Tolleif was held aboard a British prison hulk for about a year and a half before being released to a ship for a voyage to Iceland. On the return leg of that trip, Tolleif and other Scandinavian sailors mutinied against their English officers, seized the vessel and sailed it to Norway. There the cargo was sold and Tolleif became one of the wealthiest men on his home island of Tysnes.

Tolleif George (T.G.) Thomsen recorded the tale in his book "Saga from Western Norway," which he wrote in the 1930s and was privately published in 1971. In recent years, genealogist and family member Roger Fossum of Haugesund, Norway, has researched the story and discovered an amazing amount of detail that confirms and fleshes out the tale.

Working with Norway's excellent system of archives and digitized records, Roger has discovered or brought to light the following facts:

- The name of the Norwegian ship Tolleif was aboard (the *Welforenniet*), where it came from and where it was going when he was captured in 1807.
- Tolleif's British prison records, which tell where he was held, what he looked like and what clothes he was issued.
- The name of the ship to which Tolleif was assigned in mid-1809 (the *Bedre Tider*), as well as the vessel's history and previous ownership.
- Icelandic records revealing that the *Bedre Tider* arrived in Norway in late October 1809 under unusual circumstances.

What follows is a detailed analysis of Roger's remarkable research. It appears in one essay for the first time, although parts of his work have been reported before. I've added historical background to provide context for the tale, but the credit for shedding all of this new light on the saga of Tolleif Thomsen belongs to Roger.

— *Keith Thomsen*

SEIZED AT SEA

Tolleif was captured on Sept. 1, 1807, when the ship he was serving aboard, the *Welforenniet*, was taken by an armed British cutter. Tolleif's ship, whose name means Well-United or Strong Union in Norwegian and Danish, had left Bergen, Norway, on or about Aug. 15, 1807, bound for The Netherlands with an unknown cargo.

Although British records say the *Welforenniet* was taken at Yarmouth, a small port about 100 miles northeast of London, T.G. says the ship was boarded and seized on the North Sea. T.G. is almost certainly correct. Yarmouth was the headquarters for the northern wing of a British fleet enforcing a naval blockade of the European continent, including the Netherlands. The British Navy had already seized and confiscated hundreds of ships and cargoes for violating the blockade that the *Welforenniet* was trying to penetrate, so Yarmouth was about the last port on Earth where it would willingly have called but the most likely place a captured ship would be taken.

The mention of a cutter in the capture also supports the claim of a high-seas encounter. Cutters were small, very fast, armed warships used in blockade enforcement. They had one tall mast that could carry a lot of sail in relation to the boat's size, giving cutters the speed they needed to chase down ships at sea. British cutters of the time usually carried five to eight cannons, more than enough to intimidate or sink any merchant ship they came across. On the other hand, their speed gave them the ability to outrun larger warships that might threaten them.

British records describe "Tolev Tomsen" as 28 years old, 5-foot, 4 -1/2 inches in height with red hair, blue eyes and a pimpled (reddish?) Complexion. He was rated as an able (experienced) seaman. He was wrongly reported to be a native of Bergen. Tolleif had indeed been living there prior to the *Welforenniet*'s voyage, but he was born and spent his childhood at Røen farm on Tysnes island south of Bergen.

Roger has identified two other Norwegian sailors captured with Tolleif. They were Gullik Pedersen, 14, and Torbjørn Knudsen, 43. Both were rated as able seamen from Bergen. Little is known of Gullik except his youth, but Roger learned much about Torbjørn Knudsen because he had been enrolled in a kind of naval reserve formed by the Danish government in 1804-05.

Denmark ruled Norway at the time, so Norwegian sailors were included in the reserve. All maritime workers connected to shipping who were not burgers (officially recognized merchants), or the sons of burgers, had to be registered for possible service aboard warships in an emergency. As a reserve member, Torbjørn had to report his whereabouts to officials and get their permission to travel outside of Bergen or to sail on ships bound for other ports.

Torbjørn's records provide a glimpse into a Norwegian sailor's life at the time. Between 1805 and 1807, he made two voyages to the Oslo Fjord, one of them aboard the "jekt" *Anna Helena*. A *jekt* (pronounced yacht) was a small, simple cargo boat with a half-deck and sails. It would not been a very impressive vessel.

Torbjørn did not spend all of his time at sea. He also made two trips to Sunnfjord — once for summer farm work and once to spend the winter months. Sunnfjord seems to have been Torbjørn's family home. Since it is a village just a few miles east of Tolleif's home at Røen farm, the two men may have been friends. Tolleif and Torbjørn also lived in the same district of Bergen in 1807.

On Aug. 14, 1807, Torbjørn was given permission by Danish officials to sail aboard the ship *Welforenniet* on a voyage to the Netherlands. I think we can safely assume that Tolleif signed on for the voyage about the same time and that the ship departed soon after.

Hans Nilsen Hauge

T.G. Thomsen said Tolleif's ship was owned by the famous Norwegian lay preacher and evangelist Hans Nilsen Hauge. There is no reason to doubt this assertion. Hauge had a flare for business as well as preaching and had become a merchant at Bergen in 1804. Roger's research has shown that he owned two ships — a large vessel with a crew of 16 that was used in the grain trade and a smaller vessel with a crew of four that carried a variety of cargoes. Roger believes the *Welforenniet* was the smaller of the two ships, since he could find records for only three crewmen from it.

It is unclear if Hauge ordered, or even knew about, the last voyage of the *Welforenniet*. In 1807 he was imprisoned in Oslo for preaching without permission.

Hauge may have continued to run his business from his jail cell, or someone may have been running it for him. But whoever ordered the *Welforenniet* to sail for the Netherlands in August 1807 was running a huge risk of losing the ship. The British blockade was tightening and

the outbreak of war between Denmark-Norway and Britain had become almost certain.

Here is the historical background that explains why. The French Revolution in 1789 had led to a series of wars between a newly energized France and the rest of the great European powers of the time: England, the Hapsburg Empire (Austria-Hungary), Prussia (northeast Germany), Russia, and Spain. The French, under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, defeated all these nations separately or in coalition. By 1806 Napoleon in effect ruled continental Europe through annexation, puppet governments or alliances.

But Napoleon had not been able to occupy or rule Britain because it was protected by its island location and the British Navy. Napoleon launched an economic war by barring British trade with the European continent in November 1806. Britain responded by ordering a naval blockade of all European ports controlled by France or its allies, and the British Navy began seizing ships at sea off blockaded ports.

Napoleon also wanted to invade England but needed ships to do so. The British were determined that he not get them.

These economic and military considerations brought neutral Denmark-Norway into the forefront for both France and Britain. The Danes were still carrying on some limited trade with Britain, which provoked France but didn't satisfy the British. The Danes also had warships and merchant vessels that could serve French invasion plans. The British decided to attack the Danes and destroy their maritime resources to prevent the ships from falling into French hands.

In mid-August 1807, just as the *Welforenniet* was about to leave Bergen, 30,000 British troops invaded the Danish island of Zealand and began to surround the capital of Copenhagen. The Danish army, which had been moved to the southern border to face the French, was powerless to intervene. On Sept. 3, 1807, a British fleet bombarded Copenhagen and seized all the ships and naval supplies there. Meanwhile, scores of other British warships were sent out to sea to seize all the Danish and Norwegian ships they could find.

In the weeks just prior to and just after the attack on Copenhagen the British took a total of 1,400 Danish and Norwegian ships and imprisoned about 7,000 Scandinavian sailors. So whoever ordered the *Welforenniet* to sail in mid-August was obviously poorly informed, was desperate for money or had very good marine insurance.

TOLLEIF IN PRISON

Tolleif was held as a prisoner of war (POW) at Yarmouth until Nov. 29, 1807. On Dec. 3, 1807, he was enrolled as a POW aboard a prison hulk at Chatham, a small city about 30 or 40 miles east-southeast of London. Chatham was just up the Medwey River from the Thames River estuary. Because it was so close to the sea, sailing ships could easily move up and down the Medwey on tidal currents to visit the royal dockyard and arsenal at Chatham.

Roger's research shows there were 12 prison ships anchored two abreast just downstream from the Chatham docks and arsenal. Which of these vessels Tolleif was aboard wasn't recorded, but the 12 ships were named *Fyen, Kronprins Fredrik* and *Nassau*, all captured Danish warships; and *Crusty, Sampson, Buckingham, Irresistible, Bahama, Canada, Glory* and *Belliqueux*.

With their ballast, masts, rigging and guns removed, the battered old warships floated very high in the water. In addition, sheds for cooking, washing and storage were built on deck, making the prison hulks look like Bible pictures of Noah's Ark.

A British prison hulk circa 1800.

Resemblence to anything divine ended there, however. The ships' former gun ports were fitted with iron bars, and the lower decks had been divided into cages to hold between 500 and 1,000 prisoners. Most POWs were given little work, got little exercise and barely survived on rations of bad fish and bread supplied by corrupt contractors.

One visitor to a prison hulk described the inmates as "a generation of dead men rising for a moment from their tombs, hollow-eyed, wan and earthy of complexion, bent-backed, shaggy bearded, and of a terrifying emaciation." Others remarked about the terrible smell aboard the hulks caused by poor sanitation.

Records indicate that as many as a quarter of prison hulk inmates died from disease such as typhus, malnutrition, neglect and brutal treatment. If the estimate of 7,000 Scandinavian POWs is correct, as many as 2,000 of them died in British custody.

Tollief had several factors working in favor of his survival, however. We know from T.G. that Tolleif was imprisoned with other Norwegians and Danes, including ship's officers. The POWs shared a common language that their guards could not understand. T.G. said the captains and ship's officers started navigation classes for POWs. This shows they were providing leadership and maintaining a form of ship's discipline. That discipline paid off later. T.G.'s narrative indicates that Tolleif and his fellow prisoners discussed the possibility of mutiny and escape well in advance. The plot was never betrayed.

British records indicate Tolleif was held at Chatham from Dec. 3, 1807, until Jan. 17, 1809, a period of 13.5 months. During that period he was issued clothing on four occasions:

- March 9 — one hat, one shirt and one pair of stockings.
- March 18 — One shirt and one pair of stockings.
- Dec. 11 — One hat, one jacket, one waistcoat (vest), one pair of trousers, two shirts, one pair of shoes and one pair of stockings.
- June 13 — One hat, one jacket, one waistcoat, one pair of trousers, two shirts and one pair of shoes.

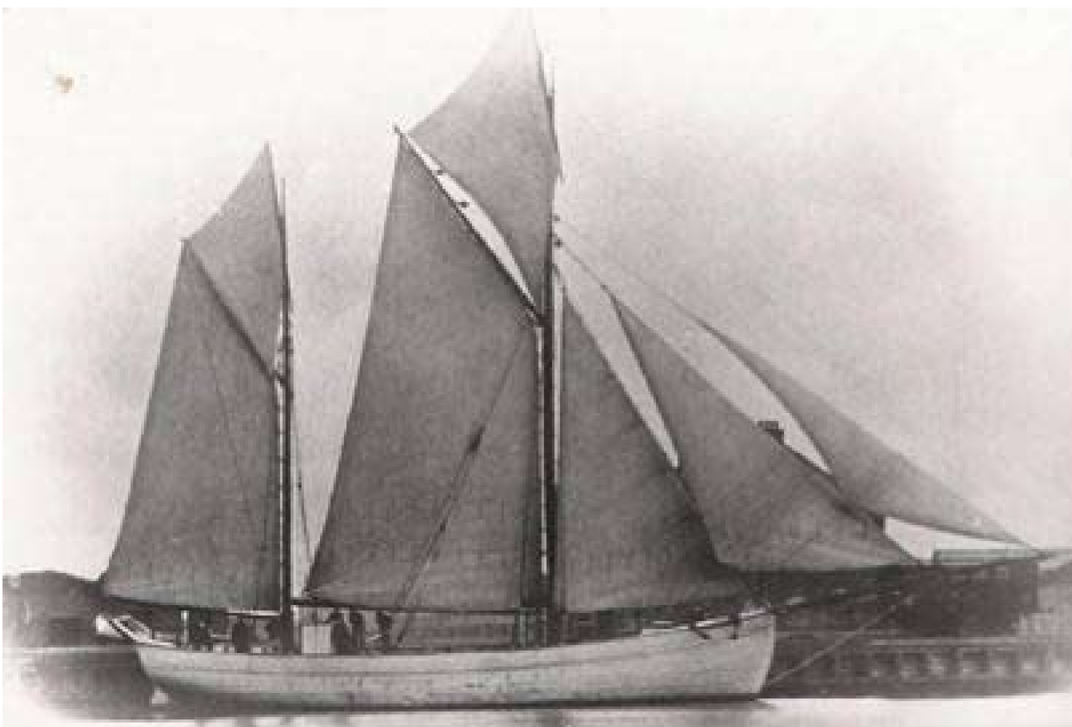
The years of these clothing issues were not given, but assuming they are listed in chronological order, the correct dates would have been March 9, March 18 and Dec. 11, 1808, and June 13, 1809. That last date is a curious one since Tolleif was discharged to serve aboard a ship on Jan. 17, 1809, five months earlier. Apparently he was still considered a POW despite the discharge. Note that the last two issues were more generous than the first two. The British were probably outfitting Tolleif for a sea voyage, where he would need a change of clothes.

TOLLEIF RELEASE FOR SEA SERVICE

During their imprisonment aboard the hulks, Tolleif and the other POWs were pressured to sail aboard British ships in return for their freedom. Some Danish and Norwegian POWs took the offer of berths on English merchant vessels, mostly on ships bound for the East Indies.

According to one source, this manner of gaining release was disdained by the remaining prisoners and by public opinion in the homeland, but taking jobs on enemy merchant ships was not considered treason. Ulrik Fredrik Rosing, a Norwegian priest who worked among the prisoners until 1811, estimated that about 300 of the 7,000 prisoners went into English service, less than five percent.

The British were forced to recruit POWs for sea service because the British Navy had been rapidly expanded to meet the needs of the Napoleonic Wars. The navy nearly tripled in size from 45,000 men in 1793 to 130,000 in 1800 and was largely maintained at that level for the next 15 years. The result was a labor shortage in both the navy and merchant marine. POWs were a potential source for trained sailors to meet that shortage.



The Bedre Tider would have looked like this Swedish-built galease called the Emma. Note the tall foremast, the fore-and-aft rigging (sails parallel to the keel of the ship) and the large amount of sail the small vessel could carry.

Tolleif, although distrustful of the British offer of freedom in exchange for sea service, accepted an assignment on Jan. 17, 1809, to a ship with an ironic name — the *Bedre Tider*, which means Better Times in Danish and Norwegian.

Why the British had a ship with a Danish or Norwegian name is easy to explain. The *Bedre Tider* was one of the 1,400 ships seized by the British in the days just before and after the 1807 attack on Copenhagen

The *Bedre Tider* was built in Sweden in 1794, had a displacement of 67 tons, and was a "galease," a kind of ship so plentiful in Scandinavia and the Baltic at the time that the Swedes called them "the house sparrows of the sea."

A galease was similar to a schooner, with full lines and a large, broad stern. Galease rigging consists of two masts, with the front one somewhat taller then the stern one. Many galeases were "hermaphrodites" in the jargon of the sea. In other words, they blended two classic kinds of rigging. They carried a large square sail on the main or fore mast and fore-and-aft sails on the rear mast. A "square" sail is set at a 90 degree angle (or square) to the keel of a ship; a fore-and-aft sail is set parallel to the keel of the ship.

The *Bedre Tider*'s specifications are unknown but it was probably 60 to 70 feet long with a beam of 16 to 18 feet. Despite its small size, the *Bedre Tider* was a veteran of the Iceland trade, having made several voyages there across the stormy North Atlantic in the late 1790s and early 1800s.

In 1807, the owner of the *Bedre Tider* was Niels Lambertsen, a Dane who was a merchant at Stokkseyri, a small port on the south coast of Iceland. Lambertsen was either 34 or 69 years old. The discrepancy arises from the fact that a Danish census showed that two men of the same name lived at the store in Stokkseyri. The older Niels was the father of the younger man, who was married to a Danish woman, Kristine Pedersdatter, 46. They had a daughter, Dorothea Maria. It was probably the younger man who ran the business.

Lambertsen lost the *Bedre Tider* when it was captured by the British frigate *HMS Shannon* on Aug. 28, 1807, in the Shetland Islands. The *Shannon* (951 tons, 38 guns) was one of the most famous British Navy ships of the Napoleonic era. Its name will be familiar to readers of the popular Patrick O'Brian sea novels. The *Shannon* took part in THE classic ship-to-ship battle of the Age of Sail, a clash with the *USS Chesapeake* in the Atlantic Ocean off Boston on June 1, 1813. It was there that the American Capt. James Lawrence uttered his famous last words, "Don't give up the ship!" The phrase became the motto of the U.S. Navy. Unfortunately, after Lawrence died his successor promptly gave up the ship.

But back to the *Bedre Tider*: After its seizure, it was sailed to England and pressed into the merchant service by the British, who apparently didn't bother to change its name. A British ship with a Danish name trading in Iceland would probably have been less offensive to the Danish officials there. Iceland was a Danish colony. Previously, all Icelandic trade with non-Danish merchants was banned, but the British had been moving in since the outbreak of war.

MUTINOUS MEN

One of the sailors aboard the *Bedre Tider* when it was taken in Shetland in 1807 was Peder Hansen, a cooper (barrel maker) and a native of Copenhagen. British prison records say Hansen was 24 years old, 5-foot, 3-inches tall and had a fair or reddish complexion, light brown hair, gray eyes and a small mark or scar on his right cheek bone. He was imprisoned at Woolwich and Chatham until he was released and returned to the *Bedre Tider* on Jan. 17, 1809. That was the same day Tolleif was sent to the *Bedre Tider* from Chatham, so the two certainly knew one another.

Roger has identified a third member of the 1809 crew of *Bedre Tider*. He was Christen or Christian Christiansen, 22, from Jylland, Denmark, who was captured on Aug. 28, 1807, while aboard the ship Cecelia. He was held at Chatham until released on July 12, 1809, to the *Bedre Tider*.

So we now know three members of the crew of the *Bedre Tider* on the fateful voyage to Iceland in 1809 — Peder Hansen, Christian Christiansen and Tolleif. T.G.'s book "Saga from Western Norway" named a fourth member of the crew, Tolleif's friend 'Hans' Helland. T.G. said Helland came from Sogn and became a merchant in Bergen after the war.

Amund Helland

Helland's identity remains something of a mystery, however. Roger has been unable to identify a Bergen merchant by the name of Hans Helland from the early 1800s. Roger has, however, linked Tolleif to a man named Amund Helland. Amund, like Tolleif, was a follower and employee of Hans Nilsen Hauge in Bergen prior to 1807. He lived near Tolleif in Bergen after the war and was one of the baptismal sponsors of Tolleif's son Thomas in 1819.

An Amund Helland family history says he was from Bjerkreim in the county of Rogaland, not Sogn. The book says Amund worked for Hauge in Bergen from 1804 until 1807, then became a sailor, made several voyages to Sweden and Denmark, and returned to Bergen in 1813

to set himself up as a merchant with the money he saved during his years at sea.

This account raises as many questions as it answers. The Swedes joined the British attack on Denmark in 1807, and Denmark and Sweden remained at war for several years thereafter, making peaceful maritime voyages between the two highly unlikely. Moreover, the British blockade effectively stopped all shipping between Norway and Denmark, so how could Amund have been making voyages for six years without being captured?

I believe T.G.'s Hans and Amund are one and the same person. Amund Helland had a son named Hans, and that may be the source of the confusion over the first name.

T.G. did not give any details of Tolleif's voyage to Iceland, but the usual route for British ships going there was to sail north to the Shetland Islands and then west to Iceland. Small vessels like the *Bedre Tider* did not have elaborate or expensive navigation equipment, so it was much easier to make voyages in short legs to easily identified destinations using simple compass courses. The extra time and expense of such indirect routes was not an issue, since labor was cheap and the wind to move the vessel was free.

The *Bedre Tider* took on a cargo of sheep, meat and wool in Iceland. The mutiny occurred on the return leg. Here is what T.G. wrote about the incident: "They ... were returning to England when the ship was driven by a northwest storm toward the coast of Norway. The Norwegians aboard had forseen such a possibility and had planned accordingly. They overpowered the English crew and shut them in, and set their course for Norway. Before they got there, they were observed and chased by a British man-of-war, but they were able to slip in the rocky coast with their prize. Tolleif, with his share of the prize money, bought a coast vessel."

First, let's look at that gale from the northwest. To a landlubber like myself, a northwest gale off Iceland does not seem ideal for making an escape to Norway.

Norway is straight east of Iceland, while Britain is to the southeast. A northwest wind would seem to be ideal for carrying the ship directly towards Britain, not Norway.

But sailing ships did not sail very well with the wind directly astern. A wind from astern filled only the sails on the after, or mizzen, mast. This prevented the forward sails from filling properly, rendering them of little use. But if the wind struck a ship's sails at a 45 degree angle from astern, it filled all the sails and gave the ship maximum speed. Thus a northwest gale off the coast of Iceland was ideal for speeding due east toward Norway.

Second, notice that T.G. said the sailors had been expecting such a wind and had planned their mutiny around it. I believe this detail is evidence of the true value of those navigation classes held aboard the prison hulk the previous year.

What the Norwegian sailors would have been taught as navigation is not what we would consider navigation today. The POWs did not have maps, charts, compasses, sextants or chronometers. But aside from the compass, these were not widely available to Norwegian ship captains and navigators anyway. An 1839 survey of 200 Norwegian ships found that only five had sextants (for determining latitude) and only two had chronometers (for determining longitude).

Instead, most sailing in Tolleif's time was done with a compass and various skills honed by years of personal experience at sea. For example, navigation in the Baltic Sea at the time was done by sounding line. A lead weight capped with a sticky ball of tallow was heaved overboard periodically. The depth of the water plus the kind of silt and debris that stuck to the tallowed weight when retrieved told an experienced captain where he was with startling accuracy.

Other factors that aided navigators in the 1800s were a detailed knowledge of local wind patterns and currents, seasonal variation in those winds and currents, other weather patterns, tidal features, the behavior of sea birds and mammals, the presence or absence of driftwood and seaweed, and differences in the appearance of the sky and clouds over land or ice.

Judging from T.G.'s account, the sailors obviously were familiar with wind patterns around Iceland. The two Danish sailors may have been there before, but they could just as well have learned about Icelandic winds in the prison hulk navigation classes.

Finally, the mutiny was apparently accomplished with a minimum of violence. T.G. says only that Tolleif and the others "overpowered" the English crew and "shut them in," apparently locking then in the cabin or hold. This might have been a mitigating factor had the mutineers been recaptured by the British warship that pursued them. Mutiny was a capital offense punishable by hanging under British maritime law, a sentence the British Navy often carried out with great swiftness and brutality.

At this point in our story, we come to some records that, while they do not directly confirm a mutiny aboard the *Bedre Tider*, do prove that something very strange happened on the voyage from Iceland to Britain that resulted in the ship turning up unexpectedly in Norway.

Some time ago, I discovered during an internet search a summary of records held in the Icelandic archives. This summary mentions four letters between officials in Norway and Iceland about the *Bedre Tider*. The first letter, dated Oct. 25, 1809, says the *Bedre Tider* had recently arrived in "Christiana's jurisdiction," that is, in Norway. Christiana is the old name for Oslo, Norway's capital. Another of the letters says the *Bedre Tider* was in Kristiansand, a port on the southern tip of Norway.

Roger contacted researchers in Iceland and got copies of some of these letters. Unfortunately, they do not shed a lot of light on the situation other than the facts I mentioned above. They are written in a formal, convoluted style and involve terms whose maritime or bureaucratic meaning has long been lost.

The letters do indicate that ship owner Lambertsen was going to get an insurance payment for the *Bedre Tider*, probably due to the difficulty of returning the ship to him during the British blockade. The correspondence was handled in Norway by a man identified only as "Busch," who was some kind of banker, money manager, broker or customs official. Interestingly, one of Amund Helland's six partners in a Bergen cotton mill just after the war was "A. Busch."

To understand what probably happened next, some definitions are in order. First, a ship and cargo taken by force at sea is called a prize. When such ships and cargoes are taken to a neutral port and sold, the proceeds are split among all the sailors who seized it. This is called the prize money. Special courts were set up to administer such sales and settle disputes about the splitting of the prize money.

The *Bedre Tider* and its cargo were probably sold in Kristiansand or some other port with a prize court. During the Napoleonic Wars, Bergen had a reputation as a ready market for such pirated ships, so the vessel may have ended up there.

But wherever the *Bedre Tider* was sold, the return must have been substantial. Tolleif's share of the prize money was enough to purchase a coastal trading vessel, while his friend 'Hans' Helland became a merchant.

In 1816 Tolleif paid a tax of 27 specie dollars as the owner and captain of a large sloop. There were few people on Tysnes island who paid more, indicating he was one of the most prosperous people on the island. ❧

In memory of
Astrid Caroline Thomsen (1914-2007)
who kept the old stories alive