One of the greatest explorers of the 18th century, Capt. James Cook made three voyages to the Pacific, conducting detailed surveys of all he saw and adding significantly to European knowledge of that region. His death at the hands of Hawaiians in the midst of his third voyage transformed him into a national hero in Great Britain, and his fame prompted other explorers to follow in his footsteps.   Cook was born in Yorkshire, England on October 27, 1728, the son of a farm laborer. He received a rudimentary education due to the benevolence of his father's employer, who saw promise in the boy. In 1745, he was apprenticed to a shopkeeper, but the arrangement proved unsatisfactory. The following year, his apprenticeship was transferred to Walker's, a shipping firm on the Yorkshire coast.   Cook grew to love the sea and prospered in his apprenticeship. He spent most of his time navigating ships around the treacherous coastline, carrying coal from Newcastle to various British ports. A serious young man, Cook earned a reputation for being disciplined, methodical, and exacting in his work. He enjoyed steady promotions at Walker's during his tenure there.   In the summer of 1755, just as the Seven Years' War was about to erupt between Great Britain and France, Cook joined the British Royal Navy as a common seaman. Cook quickly proved his worth and received several promotions, although the navy's regulations prohibited him from becoming an officer until he had served for at least six years. He served aboard the *Eagle,* which spent its time policing the English Channel and enforcing a blockade against the French.   In 1757, Cook was reassigned to the *Soleby* and then the *Pembroke,* which took him to North America and played an active role in the British conquest of Canada. Cook was reassigned once again, this time to the *Northumberland,* which stayed in Canadian waters to conduct extensive surveys of the territory. With his reputation for accuracy and diligence, Cook took the lead in performing those surveys, gaining for himself considerable recognition and praise from the British admiralty. Although he had still not been promoted to the rank of an officer, he garnered the unofficial titles of "engineer" and the "king's surveyor." He made frequent trips between North America and Britain during the 1760s and returned to England in the winter of 1767-1768.   Cook's sojourn in England proved short, allowing him little time to spend with his wife and family. After a brief courtship, he had married Elizabeth Bates in December 1762, and she eventually bore him six children, only three of which survived infancy. After only a few months at home in the spring of 1768, Cook received an offer he could not refuse. At the behest of the scientific Royal Society, the British government decided to launch an expedition to the South Pacific. The expedition's stated purpose was to observe the transit of the planet Venus, an event that astronomers warned would not occur again for a century, in an effort to calculate the distance between the Earth and the Sun. Secretly, the British government wanted to explore the area in a quest to discover a vast continent rumored to exist in the region. Through the influence of his connections and the prestige of his own reputation, Cook was asked to lead the expedition aboard a ship named the *Endeavour.* Accompanied by a botanist, a landscape artist, an astronomer, and a natural historian, the expedition left England on August 25, 1768.   Cook, newly appointed to the rank of lieutenant, insisted that his crew conform with his strict code of discipline during the voyage and mandated high standards for cleanliness and hygiene that helped prevent disease. The *Endeavour* sailed first to the Madeira Islands, then to Rio de Janeiro, before rounding Cape Horn in January 1769. In April, the expedition landed in Tahiti, where the Tahitians appeared pleased to entertain Cook and his crew. On June 3, Cook observed the transit of Venus, and in mid-July, the expedition left to search for the rumored southern continent.   Sailing southwest, Cook landed in New Zealand in October. New Zealand's islands were generally believed to be the tip of the undiscovered continent, but Cook carefully surveyed the coast and quickly discovered that the land was not a peninsula, but islands. He finished his amazingly accurate charts of New Zealand in March 1770, and the *Endeavour* sailed further west in search of the continent.   In late April, Cook caught sight of western Australia. (The Dutch had discovered southern Australia and named it New Holland, but they had failed to recognize that it was part of a large continent.) Cook named the region New South Wales and made overtures to the indigenous people, who repudiated Cook's attempts to establish cordial relations. Cook carefully began charting the eastern coast of Australia, sailing north and skirting the coast of what is today Queensland. The *Endeavour* nearly sank when it ran aground on the Great Barrier Reef, but Cook's cool demeanor and quick thinking saved the ship. He was forced to anchor the vessel in a river for six weeks, however, while the crew performed crucial repairs. During that respite, the scientists who had accompanied the expedition explored the area and carefully recorded their observations. Cook's expedition finally returned to England in July 1771.   Cook's first voyage excited much interest in England. The government proposed another expedition, this time with two ships, and offered the command to Cook, whom King George III had promoted to commander in August 1771. Cook assented and took command of the *Resolution* and the *Adventure.* Once again accompanied by a team of scientists, Cook's expedition sailed from England on July 13, 1772. Skirting the edge of Antarctica's ice floes, Cook spent the next three years attempting to locate the southern continent before resolving that the continent did not exist. Arriving back in England in July 1775, Cook's important discoveries overshadowed any disappointment over the nonexistent continent. First, he had successfully charted a previously unknown portion of the Pacific Ocean and its islands. Second, he had proved that crews could survive months, even years, on ships by taking proper precautions against scurvy and other diseases. Cook also wrote a detailed account of his second voyage that was later published, adding to his fame.   Cook, newly appointed to the rank of captain, set out on a third expedition on July 12, 1776. On this trip, which included the *Resolution* and a newer ship, the *Discovery,* Cook's goal was to discover the Northwest Passage, a rumored waterway across North America that would promote trade between Europe and the Far East. Several efforts had been made in the previous centuries to locate the eastern opening of the passage, believed to be located in Canada. At the British government's behest, Cook determined to locate the western opening.   Sailing around the southern tip of Africa, the expedition stopped at several ports in the South Pacific before heading for the western coast of North America. On January 18, 1778, Cook discovered a chain of islands north of the equator that he named the Sandwich Islands (present-day Hawaii). He recognized the great potential the island chain held for trade in the Pacific, located as it was between the Far East and North America, but the expedition stopped only briefly, reaching the coast of North America (near present-day Oregon) on March 7. Cook continued north up the coast, investigating inlets and bays for any sign of the Northwest Passage. On August 9, he reached the Bering Strait and realized that he had failed in his mission.   In November 1778, the expedition returned to the Sandwich Islands, landing in mid-January 1779 on the biggest island in the chain, Hawaii. Apparently, the landing fulfilled a long-awaited prophesy that a god would return to the islands in a great ship. Cook was therefore treated as a god, and his crew enjoyed a lavish ceremonial feast in their honor. The Hawaiians also provided supplies for the ships' journey home. The expedition left Hawaii on February 4, but a storm forced them to return only a few days later.   The Hawaiians were discouraged to see the expedition return. In addition, a number of violent disputes erupted between them and Cook's crew over various thefts, as the Hawaiians had no concept of private property. In an attempt to protect his crew, Cook ventured ashore on February 13, intending to hold one of the local chiefs hostage. The chief agreed, but the Hawaiians refused, and a large, angry crowd formed. While attempting to return to his ship, a group of Hawaiian men beat Cook to death on the beach. The British buried Cook at sea on February 22, 1779, and the expedition returned to Britain in 1780. By that time, Cook's demise had catapulted him to the heights of fame. Over 100 years after his death, his journals were published to critical acclaim and intense public interest.

"James Cook." *World Geography: Understanding a Changing World*. ABC-CLIO, 2013. Web. 17 Sept. 2013.