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## “Dead Men’s Ships”: The Last Terrible Voyage of the *Hervatting* and *Hersteller*

It seemed such a clever plan. For years, the *Vereenighde Oost-Indische Compagnie* had cast covetous eyes on the flow of Mexican silver reaching Manila from the far side of the Pacific. The Spaniards were uninspired traders, but even so they managed to amass tremendous profits from their annual crossings to New Spain. How much better might the Dutch do, if only given access to this closed market? The first Batavian overtures had been rejected by the Philippine authorities, politely but firmly; but the Dutch were willing to resort to more underhanded methods.

Every spring a convoy of Chinese junks sailed from Macao to Manila. The Spaniards bought large quantities of silks, vases and gold jewellery from these visitors, which they consigned to one of the two galleons lying at anchor in the bay. This vessel cleared for New Spain that same summer, reaching the Mexican coast by year’s end. A great commercial fair was then held in Acapulco, where the Asian goods were sold at fabulous prices, paid for in Mexican and Peruvian specie. The galleon departed on her return voyage in April, arriving in the Philippines just before her consort set sail on the next crossing. Thus, there was always a galleon circulating between the two Spanish ports.

But when the War of Jenkins’ Ear broke out between Britain and Spain, the English Commodore George Anson disrupted this traffic. Rounding South America, he terrorized the west coast of New Spain before crossing the Pacific Ocean and intercepting the homeward-bound *Nuestra Señora de Covadonga* off Cape Espíritu Santo in June of 1743. The Philippine galleons, although large, were built more for trade than defense, so the *Covadonga* proved no match for Anson’s *Centurion*. The Spaniard carried 44 small cannon to the man o’ war’s heavy 60, so the issue was quickly decided. The *Covadonga* was pounded into submission, sailed to China, stripped of more than three million pesos’ worth of treasure, and sold off as a hulk.

Panic seized the Spaniards in Manila. Their sole remaining galleon, the *Nuestra Señora del Pilar*, was

also armed with 44 light pieces, so the local merchants were reluctant to consign any cargoes to her. A new 70-gun galleon was being laid down to replace the lost *Covadonga*, but it would be more than two years before her construction would be complete. Until then, the Spanish feared for their trade.

This delighted the neutral Dutch at Batavia. Learning of the Spaniards’ discomfiture, Governor-General Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff hatched a scheme to circumvent the Mexican monopoly. Knowing the Spanish empire to be desperately short of goods because of the Royal Navy’s blockade, he believed Dutch East Indiamen might be welcomed in Mexico - especially if the Manila galleon failed to appear. This latter was easy to arrange.

Early in 1745, rumours began reaching Manila from Batavia that the English had returned to the South China Sea, hunting for the galleon. This was enough for the Spaniards to cancel the departure of their *Pilar*, which had already begun to load. But the story was false, concocted by Van Imhoff and his V.O.C. colleagues to discourage the galleon from sailing. This ploy was made even more convincing by the fact that a British vessel materialized in the Sibuyan Sea, setting up a battery ashore. The Spanish governor was also dying of dysentery, with the Bishop of Ilocos assuming his duties on an interim basis. This unworldly churchman even wrote to Van Imhoff thanking him for the warning, little realizing that he had been duped and that the English intruder was actually acting in concert with the Dutch.

Having disposed of the competition, Van Imhoff moved to the second phase of his scheme. The Dutch vessels *Straat van Banda*, *Zwerver*, *Galatea* and *Don Quichote* comprised the convoy, with the British privateers *Fame* and *Good Cecil* (the latter serving under Dutch colours, although in fact they had been included in case any English blockaders should be encountered). After loading with European goods, the six ships travelled to Macao to buy a cargo of Chinese luxuries, such as the Spaniards themselves carried on their crossings to

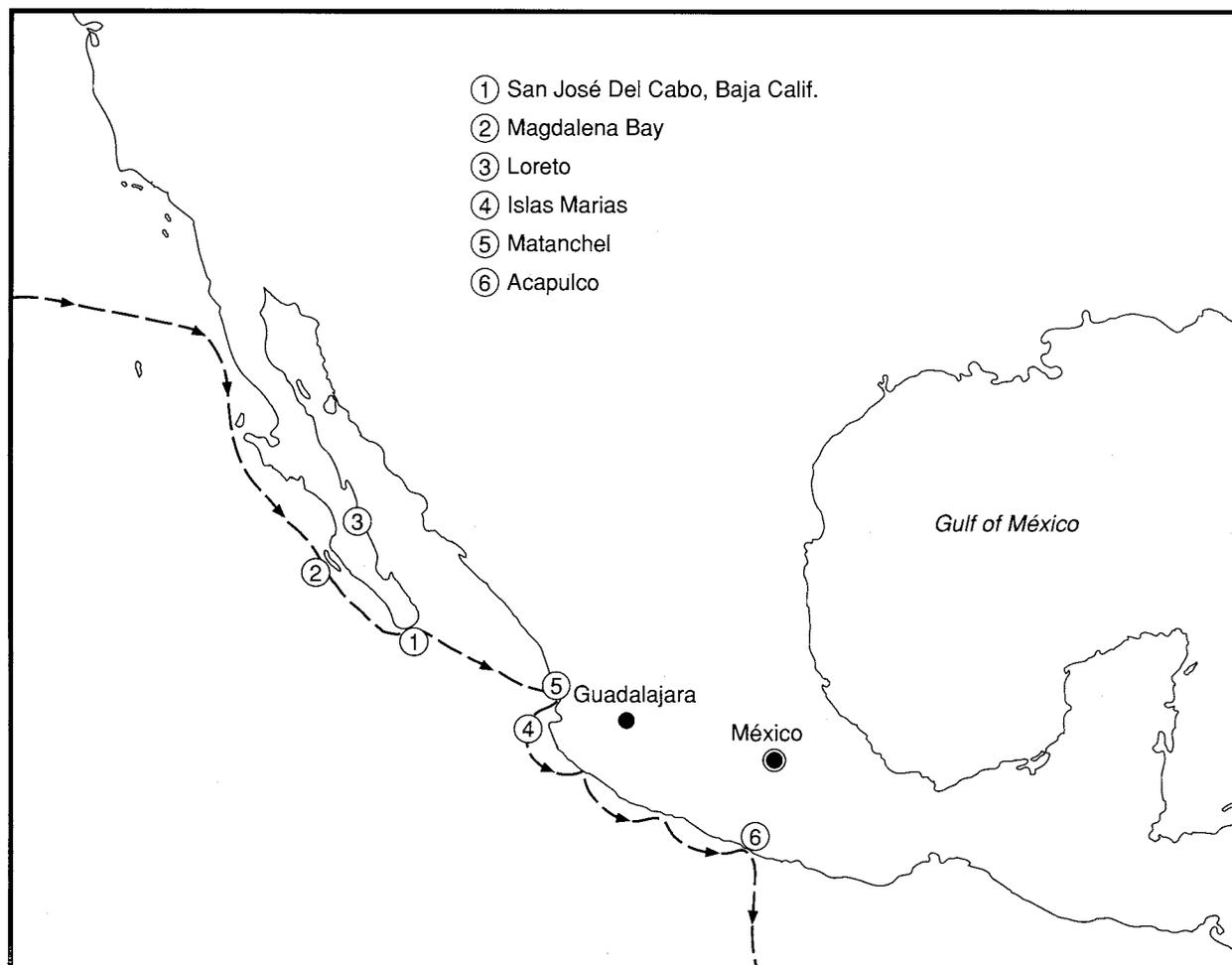


Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies 1743-1750. From: *All the paintings of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam*, Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1976, p.716.



Don Francisco de Güemes y Horcasitas, Conde de Revillagigedo, Viceroy of Mexico 1746-1755. From: Jaime Castañeda Iturbide: *Gobernantes de la Nueva España*, México: Socicultural, 1986, vol.2 p.55.

Map of Mexico showing the route of the *Hervatting* and the *Hersteller*.



New Spain. By securing these items directly in China, the Dutch hoped to entice the Mexicans with much better prices.

Thus far everything had gone according to plan, but the convoy was delayed in Macao longer than expected. Word of their destination also leaked out, but there seemed little danger of the news being conveyed across to New Spain before they arrived. The expedition finally struck out into the Pacific in September of 1745, the season far advanced. Once at sea the ships encountered increasingly heavy storms and monsoons, until they were overwhelmed and became separated. One by one the damaged ships limped back into Batavia, unable to go any further.

A second attempt was made the following summer, with the cargoes transferred into the 50-gun *Hervatting* and 32-gun *Hersteller*. The two East Indiamen were manned by a crew of 400, who set sail from Batavia on 1 July 1746. By now the Spaniards had recovered from their previous dismay, and a few days later the 44-gun *Pilar* and the new 70-gun *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* left Manila, carrying a double cargo of goods - plus a secret warning to the Viceroy of New Spain, revealing the Dutch plot.

The *Hervatting* and *Hersteller* were struck by a heavy storm on August 2nd which lasted until the 8th, during which they became separated, but later they found each other. A second storm descended on them on September 5th near the Mariana Islands, and although it blew itself out the next day, they were unable to catch sight of one another again. Each sailed on for the Americas alone, while scurvy appeared amongst its crew.

On the afternoon of 26 October 1746, the *Hervatting's* lookouts spotted the faint blue streak of California's coast, and next day began sailing down it. Landings were made to search for food and water amongst the arid cliffs; the Indians proved poor but friendly. Less than two weeks later, the ship saw a canoe putting off from the tip of Baja California to meet them. This was the Jesuit missionary from San José del Cabo, greeting what he believed to be the Manila galleon. On discovering his error he nevertheless came aboard and was well received. He was Father Segismundo Taraval, a Czech, who could communicate with the Dutch through a Spanish-speaking Irish priest they had brought along.

Surprised by the Dutchmen's arrival, the Jesuit returned ashore and advised his colleague at the neighbouring mission of Santiago, Father Karl Neumayer, a German. Both men knew the Spanish Crown forbade foreign contacts, but hoped to deal with the East Indiamen anyway. Their newly-established missions were short on provisions, and the crops had been consumed by

locusts. The two Jesuits exchanged positions, so Neumayer could deal directly with the Dutch. When Taraval quit San José del Cabo, he took the cattle and young women inland with him, just in case. A warning was also sent to Father Johann Bischoff at La Paz, the next mission north, telling him of this unexpected development. He in turn advised the Jesuit at La Pasión, who relayed a warning to Magdalena Bay to watch for the real Manila galleon, as well as to the tiny provincial capital of Loreto.

However, the *Hervatting* was not a threat. Thirty-one of her crew members had died during the crossing, and many others were sick. When she anchored before San José del Cabo on 7 November 1746, the ten-man Spanish garrison was in no danger; quite the contrary. One of the first boatloads of Dutchmen that headed ashore the next morning overturned, and all aboard were lost. The only body recovered was that of its commander Lieutenant Taal, which washed ashore two days later - without its head. An ominous beginning to the Mexico visit.

Father Neumayer, though, received them warmly. The weary sailors were allowed ashore and entertained at the mission. The two sides bartered, the Dutchmen providing rice, wheat, liquor, oil, vinegar and candles in exchange for fresh meat. The Dutchmen were polite, doffing their hats to the missionary, Spanish soldiers, or when passing the chapel door. Most were Protestants, but one who was a German Catholic deserted and fled to Santiago, taking refuge in the church. Taraval sent him back under armed guard.

But although the missionaries were hospitable, the reception would be distinctly less friendly on the mainland. While the *Hervatting* lay at San José del Cabo, her consort the *Hersteller* glided past unseen out at sea. She made her landfall at the uninhabited *Islas Marias* off the coast, and on 3 January 1747 put into Manzanillo Bay and began firing a signal-gun, to find her lost sister. Instead, the concussive thuds alarmed the surrounding countryside.

When the Spaniards crept down to the shoreline for a peek, they discovered a large foreign vessel anchored off their coast. This was precisely the area where Anson had waited for the Manila galleon five years before, when the local militia had been powerless to intervene. This time they were determined to do better. The Spanish were also skittish because no galleon had arrived from the Philippines the previous year; seeing this menacing intruder, they now expected the worst.

Incredibly, the *Hersteller's* signals seemed to work, for a sail rose over the horizon a few days later. As the East Indiaman stood out to greet her, though, a second

vessel appeared astern of the first. Instead of the *Hervatting*, the *Hersteller* had blundered into the path of the *Rosario* and *Pilar*, completing their own Pacific crossing. The two Spanish treasure ships were alarmed to find an unknown vessel in their path, and quickly beat to arms. The *Hersteller* sheered off after coming quite close, leaving the Spaniards to hasten down to Acapulco with a report of this encounter.

The two galleons arrived on January 10th and sent a courier inland to Mexico City with the Philippine dispatches. Amongst these was an anonymous letter from Macao, warning the authorities that the Dutch planned to infiltrate the Mexican market. The Viceroy was particularly angry to hear he was to be bribed with 300,000 pesos. Don Francisco de Güemes y Horcasitas, Conde de Revillagigedo, was a tough but honest soldier, who had recently taken office after serving as Governor of Havana. Upon reaching Mexico, he had found the viceregal finances a shambles, and set about implementing reforms. Expenditures were reduced, taxes raised, corruption rooted out. It was now galling to find himself being named as a likely candidate for a bribe.

Furiously he sent out orders directing the coast be closed to the Dutch; the ban against foreign traders was to be vigorously enforced. It was at this untimely juncture that the *Hervatting* left San José del Cabo and presented herself at the mainland port of Matanchel on 15 January 1747. Unaware of the uproar caused by the *Hersteller's* sighting and the Viceroy's wrath, she set a messenger ashore with letters of introduction from the missionaries. These were to be carried to the capital by a retired soldier called Juan Nicolás de Estrada and presented to the Jesuit *procurador*, who was to use his influence on the Dutchmen's behalf.

This unfortunate got no further than Guadalajara before he was arrested and his papers seized. Sent on to Mexico City under guard, he was tortured to get him to reveal the interlopers' true design. In the meantime the *Hervatting* was kept under strict observation at Matanchel, and her crew prevented from landing. Unknown to them, the *Hersteller* was also lying *incommunicado* further to the southeast at Melaque.

On March 1st, after fruitlessly requesting permission to take on fresh water and wood, the *Hervatting* weighed anchor and stood out of Matanchel for the Islas Marias off the coast. While there, her consort the *Hersteller* left Melaque for San Telmo; some 28 of her crewmen were taken prisoner while attempting to come ashore. The *Hervatting* returned to Matanchel on the 9th, having replenished her supplies as best she could. An anonymous note from onshore informed the crew that her sister ship was about 100 miles away, "in desperate need

of help, its crew nearly all dead." Their own plight became increasingly desperate.

A landing party was cut off at Matanchel by Spanish cavalymen on the 12th, and seven crew members were captured. The *Hervatting* sent a complaint ashore, demanding the return of the prisoners and threatening reprisals if they were not allowed to replenish their supplies for the long voyage back to Batavia. The Spanish replied with the usual silence. On the night of March 16-17, the Dutch set a raiding party ashore, but the Spaniards were waiting in ambush. A skirmish ensued, in which four of the *Hervatting's* crewmen and one Spaniard were killed. Fifteen Dutchmen were taken captive, and they were the lucky ones. The rest were driven back aboard ship, and that same morning the East Indiaman sailed.

Without fresh provisions, the vessels could not hope to recross the Pacific Ocean. Their crew would slowly die of scurvy, thirst and hunger as the ships forged along. The evening of March 25th an unidentified sail was spotted outside Acapulco, and next morning drew nearer. At 11:00 a.m. she launched a boat, which approached the harbour mouth but then put about, and returned to the ship without speaking to anyone ashore. It is believed this was the *Hersteller*, the last time she was ever seen. Neither she nor the *Hervatting* were heard from again.

By early April the Spanish treasure ships were ready to depart, but their commander hesitated. With millions of pesos aboard, he was afraid to put to sea until the Dutchmen were accounted for. The Viceroy ordered him to sail on 8 April 1747; there was nothing to fear, Revillagigedo said, from *esos navíos de muertos* - those dead men's ships.

#### SOURCES

Volume 8 of the Marina Collection in the Mexican national archives is entirely given over to the repulse of the *Hervatting* and *Hersteller*, while Exp. 7, folios 167-200 of Volume 21 contains a dozen letters from Dutch prisoners. More material is to be found in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, which Peter Gerhard used for his article "A Dutch Trade Mission to New Spain, 1746-1747" (*Pacific Historical Review*, Volume XXIII, No. 3, August 1954, pp. 221-226).