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Sea heroes of the Dutch and Maltese fleets

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During the seventeenth century, Dutch sea heroes were popular folk heroes and played a role comparable to those of sports or music idols in today's world, in stark contrast to the aristocratic sea heroes of the Order of St John. In this article the qualities of these two kinds of heroes and their respective fleets will be reviewed. Both in the Order's and the Dutch navy it was hard to become a sea hero. One had not only to survive but also live through many sea battles, preferably successfully. Since Antiquity, all sea heroes await eternal fame; lesser achievers are condemned to oblivion. Victories were remembered and celebrated years later. Glorious defeats could be useful when one was killed in action, but best soonest forgotten when one survived! But more often than not, the shame of failure outlasted the failed sea hero for many generations.

The origin of the Order's maritime history can be established at the Holy Land, where there was a constant need for trade and shipping in provisions, arms and pilgrims. Later, during its relatively short stay in Cyprus in the late thirteenth century, after the loss of Acre in 1291, the true navy of the Order was founded. From the coast of Cyprus the neighbouring lands of Syria and Palestine were easily within reach and a new crusade to capture that which had been lost could be launched from here by sea.¹ Of course, Muslim shipping routes could also be targeted from this vantage point. Probably, the origin of the Dutch navy is less well known to the reader, although like the navy of the Order of St John, it owed its existence to war. In the low lands of what today comprise the Netherlands and Flanders, groups of irregular and disorganised bands of corsairs, called '*Watergeuzen*' were fighting against the Spanish occupiers in a period known as the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648). These *Watergeuzen* (in French known as '*les Gueux*' and in English as 'Sea Beggars') were the basis of what later would become the Dutch fleet. People joined the *Watergeuzen* for numerous reasons. Some were banned because they were Protestants or known critics of the Spanish; others wanted to participate in the armed resistance against the Spanish or were merely attracted to booty and spoils, together with idealists and liberators *cum* pirates. A particular group of disenfranchised Calvinist nobles, successful citizens, sailors and craftsmen, proved to



A detail from the painting *Marine au soleil couchant*, by Charles-François Grenier de Lacroix (1765) showing a galley of the Order of St John

(source: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Lacroix_de_Marseille_IMG_0732.jpg)

be the most successful of all these bands after they wrested the southern Dutch city of Den Briel from the Spanish on 1 April 1572.² The *Watergeuzen* were later comparable and compatible with the fleets of the Spanish, British and French. One could also compare their role with that which the Maltese sailors played before and during the era of the Order of St John in Malta, similarly starting off as gangs of pirates, free men and roughnecks.

Prior to 1568, the *Watergeuzen* lacked any structure and operated as the opportunities arose. William, Prince of Orange and Count of Nassau, the Roman Catholic statesman of the Netherlands, first used the mostly Protestant *Watergeuzen* to transport arms and soldiers for his fight against the Spanish occupiers, although with varying degrees of success. At one occurrence, when he ran out of money, they immediately started pillaging the population, making themselves quite unpopular. When his resources were restored, he organised them in what could be called the first Dutch fleet.

Charles V is an important figure in the history of Malta and the Order, but his son Philip II played an equally important role in the history of the Low countries (the geographical feature of the Dutch lands). From Spain he opted to rule these low lands with an iron fist and saw himself as the leader of the Counter-Reformation in a country very much in favour of a tolerant Calvinist



**The Dutch ship of the line
De Zeven Provinciën in 1665**
(source: [http://ageofsail.devhub.com/blog/
category/17th-century/](http://ageofsail.devhub.com/blog/category/17th-century/))

Reformation. Fears of the introduction of even harsher rules, brutality and new, crippling taxes led to an uprising over traditional urban and class liberties at first, but later growing into a full scale revolt with the fervour and zeal of a crusade. Spain was in financial dire straits and Philip II realised too late that war costs indeed an awful lot of money. Already in 1557 Spain was in default and declared bankrupt. It had stopped paying interest to its investors long before. Many smaller investors lost their savings and banks collapsed; in the meanwhile the Dutch refused to pay extra taxes (in modern terms, they did not want to provide a bail-out for their occupier). Possibly another reason why Spain was slow to the rescue of Malta during the Great Siege of 1565 was a lack of finances. During the period the Ottomans besieged Malta, in the low lands the revolt was unstoppable and culminated in the so-called Iconoclastic Fury of 1566, in which a popular revolt damaged many churches and destroyed their content of religious statues and paintings.³ Suleiman the Magnificent had sent a letter to the council of Antwerp in October of that same year, just before his death, in which he offered financial and military aid to the revolutionaries, in order to fight Spain together. But the *Watergeuzen* were already sporting Ottoman flags and had minted coins with the text 'Liever Turks dan Paaps', meaning that they preferred to be with the Turks rather than with the Pope. William of Orange had sent a letter to Selim II in 1568 requesting a continuation of the cooperation.

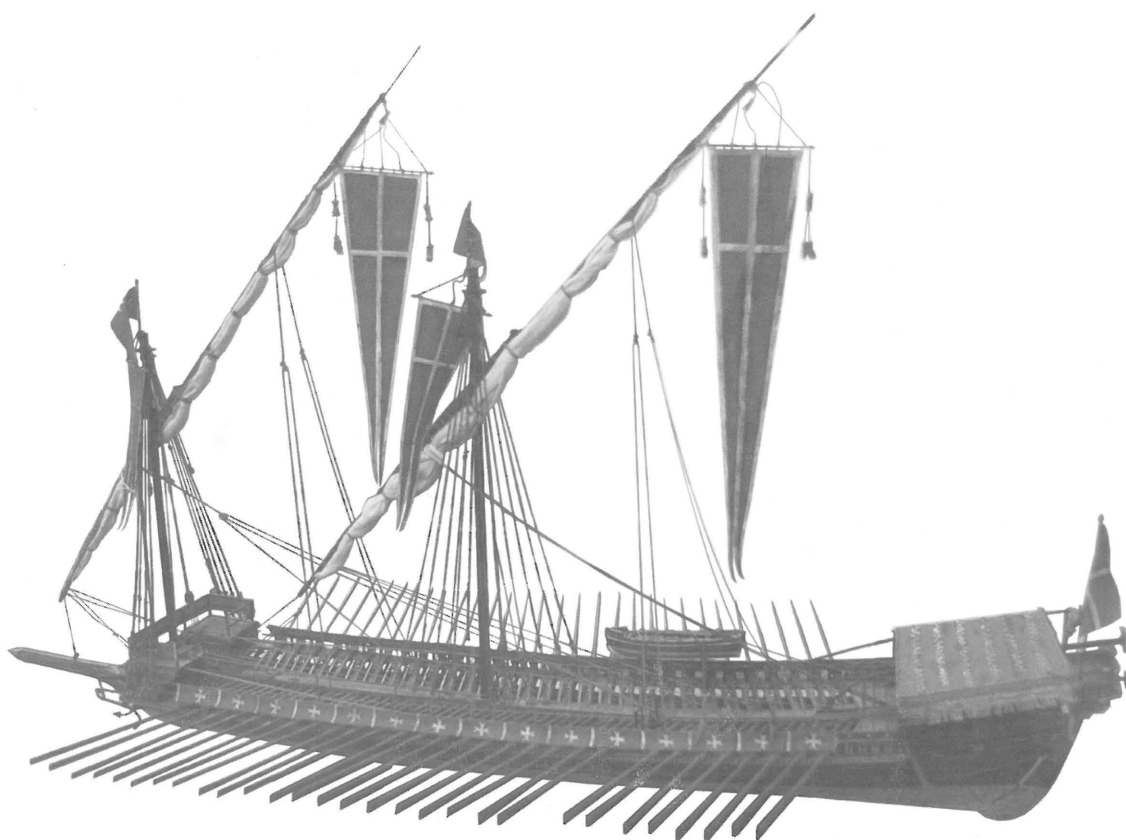
On 1 September 1575 Spain was declared bankrupt for the second time. Payments to mercenaries stopped and the consequences were predictable. A 'Spanish Fury' ran amok through a number of cities and villages. On 4 November 1575 Spanish mutineers sacked Antwerp and killed about eight thousand citizens and destroyed the better part of the city (similarly Rome had experienced its Spanish Fury on 6 May 1527 by mutinous troops of Charles V). People and councils of the low lands decided to suspend their differences regarding religion and to unite, a decision which was ratified in 1576.

Commercial expansion was as much a part of the overall resistance as the fighting itself. They also established many trade monopolies and even penetrated South-America, hitting the Spanish trade where it hurt. Dedicated Calvinists spread the revolt all over the low lands and reformed refugees brought with them a network of commerce to the fast growing ports of the low lands, in particular Antwerp, Bruges, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. Hence, commerce became a branch of war and survival by people attracted by the relative freedom of worship and social and commercial opportunities which the free-minded Dutch had to offer. Trade and not a crusade became the Dutch motto. Security, freedom to trade and to worship was tolerated as long as it led to stability.

During the Twelve Years' Truce 1609-1621, the Dutch fleet was very powerful in the Mediterranean basin fighting against pirates to protect the merchant fleets. During the period 1650-60 the Dutch fleet cruised against pirates of the Barbary Coast. Although Spain had been the enemy in more than one sense, the Dutch fleet had co-operated with Spanish and French Catholic fleets in the past to fight the Barbary Coast pirates. Algerian corsairs habitually extended their operations as far as the North Sea and Ireland. It seems that the fleet of the Order and the Dutch never co-operated, although a mutual goal was the fight against the Barbary Coast to protect Christian shipping. But the Dutch never managed to leave a lasting impression in Malta.

Fleets

There was a significant difference in the way the respective fleets were structured, of which the greatest difference was that in the fleet of the Order the command was centralised and very regimented compared to that of the Dutch fleet, where the captains and admirals had great freedom to organise themselves. After its first victory at Den Briel in 1572, a new Dutch



One of the galleys which formed part of the renowned fleet of the Order of St John

fleet structure and organisation were implemented, resulting in a decentralised system of five admiralties. Later, when in 1588 the Seven United Provinces of the Netherlands were created, this mirrored the new political situation accordingly with seven admiralties. In comparison, the Order in Malta had one Admiralty and two Commissions, one for the Galleys – *Congregazione delle Galere* – and later on another for the Sailing Ships – *Congregazione dei Vascelli*. In size, the Dutch fleet was many times bigger than the fleet of the Order and sailing ships had always been the choice of the Dutch navy, gaining their biggest successes with sailing ships during the seventeenth century. During 1651 the plan was approved to increase the Dutch fleet of sailing ships with another 35 vessels, divided over eight squadrons. The first squadron, consisting of fifteen ships-of-the-line, was sent to the Mediterranean and the other seven squadrons with twenty ships-of-the-line were spread over the area from Cape Saint Vincent (south-west of Portugal) to the south coast of Norway. Besides that, the Dutch sailed to all corners of the world to protect their trade interests with a variation of successes and failures, in chronological order, between 1568 and 1795, in West Africa, Indonesia, Japan, the Moluccas, the Philippines, Mozambique, Malacca, Guinea, the

Hudson River, Bahia, founded New Amsterdam, on Manhattan Island, Puerto Rico, the Gulf of Mexico, Elmina, Pernambuco (Brazil), the Antilles, Curacao, Ceylon, Marqanhao, Luanda, the Baltic Sea, Benguela, Cape Town, Malabar, the North American colonies, Trunajaya, Bantam, Mataram and Bengal.⁴

In contrast, the Order in Malta only inaugurated its first squadron of four ships-of-the-line in 1705, which thus joined their long-established fleet of six or seven galleys and the large additional fleet of corsairs.

The appointment of an admiral of the Order was only for two years at a stretch; a Dutch admiral would be appointed for life. Being a Dutch admiral meant that one was actually out at sea, often physically engaged in battle. An admiral of the Order, always supplied by the Langue of Italy, was much more an office bound position.

A Dutch captain or admiral would receive a very good pay and in addition to up to 30 per cent of any spoils of war. A captain of the Order would receive a regular salary, but not extremely high, while the spoils would go to the Order's Treasury. Only the knight who would

have actually captured spoils of war would receive 20 per cent, and not more than 15 per cent to any secular.⁵ In their testaments, the Dutch captains would look after their family and their estates. Knights of the Order, in their *dispropiamenti* could only leave a fifth (the *quinta*) of their estate to the persons of their choice, the rest would return to the Common Treasury of the Order.

As a result of this personal wealth, the homes and mansions of the Dutch commanders were spacious and filled with art, expensive furniture, paintings, gold and silver items. They often had more than one home and landed property and commissioned portraits of themselves. They wanted to belong to the upper classes since the majority came from humble backgrounds. The knights of the Order did practically the same, but they were of course already the upper class.

A Dutch captain would get a lump sum of money from his admiralty to buy provisions and supplies and other necessities for every trip. If he bought wisely, he could make a fortune on that alone, since the sailors had to pay for everything they consumed on board. In Malta, the Order maintained a strict bureaucracy on this matter, so that no money would be wasted. All persons on board were for the larger part maintained at the expense of the Order and the general and captain of a galley were personally responsible for the daily rations to be distributed. If they failed to do so, the monetary value of those rations would be taken from their wages.⁶ Engaging in merchandise was seen as working and therefore strictly forbidden for members of the Order. The Order's captains were not allowed to make a *scudo* on the side. The Statutes of the Order read: "That if any captain is convicted of having trafficked or of taking merchandize on board receiving freight for it, he shall be deprived of the privilege...etc."⁷

Dutch captains had a free reign on their ship and were sole master of it. At the beginning of a trip they were just issued with particular orders but it was up to the captain or admiral how to reach that goal. On a galley or sailing ship of the Order not the captain but the general of the troops was the highest in command, as the latter would represent the Grand Master and the power of general had therefore precedence over that of the captain when it came to, for example, engagement with the enemy or a chase of an enemy vessel. Both were to answer for their responsibility over the ship with their life and honour. The Order's statutes read: "Military disciplines must be kept with obedience. If a captain does not obey a general regarding war or navigation, he loses a year of his commandary's revenue and other income from the Order's estates. If

he has no money he will lose two years of standing. For the second offence this punishment will double. With the third he will be deprived of his habit."⁸

Heroism

In the early phase of the Dutch navy, up to 1629, the most important commanders were aristocrats. This hindered identification with the populace; although the merchants were successful and the navy was victorious, they were sea heroes but not popular sea heroes.

The rise of the Dutch popular sea hero cult began with Admiral Van Heemskerck who was victorious at Gibraltar against the Spanish fleet on 25 April 1607. During the battle he lost a leg through a well-aimed Spanish cannonball and died a little after. However, the Dutch fleet won and great booty was taken. His portrait was printed on pamphlets and his heroic deeds praised. Also, his portrait was minted on medals. Because he was not an aristocrat, the population could easily identify with him and a cult developed around sea heroes of humble origin.⁹ In the Order of St John there were only aristocrat sea heroes and their heroism worked only in the narrower circle of the Order, their peers and their families, since the Maltese population in those days could hardly identify with the individual members of the Order. There existed no culture of memory for those Maltese sea heroes who were either victorious or died during sea battles (or during the Great Siege of 1565 for that matter). Although the Order and Malta had won wide recognition in Europe after the Great Siege, their fame and appreciation resided in different circles than the popular ones.

The Dutch simply adored and celebrated their sea heroes. Admiral Piet Hein made a tour of triumph through various Dutch cities after he had successfully plundered a Spanish fleet carrying a fortune of silver to Spain, hence called 'the silver fleet'.¹⁰ The Battle of the Silver Fleet took place in January of 1629 at the Bay of Matanzas, Cuba, and was a very successful victory in the sense of the substantial spoils and other monetary rewards, but it was, so to say, a battle without a real battle. Due to financial restrictions, the Spanish had only a few warships guarding the cargo ships laden with South American silver while the rest of the guard was made up of rented hands and corsairs. These conveniently fled when the Dutch fleet approached (just as many captains surrendered their ship, goods and lives to the Maltese and Gozitan corsairs and pirates when they heard the war cry 'viva Malta'). Dutch sea heroes became much more popular than Dutch



Admiral Jacob Van Heemskerck

statesmen or painters, there is no monumental grave for Rembrandt (but there is one for Mattia Preti). The bigger the plunder the more it sparked the imagination.

For the Dutch sea hero it was possible to reach the highest office without any previous formal education when he was out at sea, contrary to a knight of the Order who had to undergo stiff training and education from childhood onwards on land and sea. In order to qualify, the young knight had to fulfil a novitiate and time at sea.¹¹ Birth, hierarchy and seniority were essential for a knight to start a career and to reach the highest positions. The Statutes of the Order read: "Nobody shall be a captain of a galley until he has ten years of standing, is at least twenty five years old, and has made at least three caravans in person on the galleys".¹²

From 1606 onwards, a state funeral and the erection of a monument became the privilege of Dutch sea heroes who died in the nation's service at sea in a heroic manner. This was a great boost to morale and everyone did one's best to achieve this ultimate goal when faced with no other option. To be killed at sea was a great way to finalise one's career and to be remembered for many generations. Those who had the bad luck to die on land and outside battle would forgo this honour, and were doomed to be forgotten.¹³ In other words, to die was not disgraceful, but to die disgracefully was.

There are sepulchral slabs and monuments of Dutch sea heroes throughout the Netherlands: in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Hoorn, Middelburg

and Delft, being the cities where the different seven admiralties were seated. In Malta, the Order had only one admiralty and the Order's sea heroes would receive their sepulchral slabs at St John's Co-Cathedral, since monuments were generally reserved for grand masters. Hence, the contrasts could not be starker between Calvinist or Protestant captain or admiral of a humble background who would receive a magnificent sepulchral monument at the expense of the state and a grand master of the Order of St John who generally had to commission his own monument.

The rise of the Dutch sea hero cult started with Admiral Van Heemskerck, who died gloriously during the Battle of Gibraltar against the Spanish and received a state funeral on 5 June 1607 at the Oude Kerk (Old Church) in Amsterdam, being the parish church of the Admiralty of Amsterdam.¹⁴ He also received a monument at state expense, a '*swaeren sarcksteen*', a heavy tombstone, as sign of gratitude. On the tombstone the Battle of Gibraltar was to be sculpted creating a source of inspiration for future generations. His arms and armoury, helmet and sword were placed on the tomb, even the bullet that killed him was kept for a long time and regarded as precious as a reliquary. Its Latin inscription and poem by the national poet P.C. Hooft is of outstanding quality. In general, the texts on the Dutch monuments show a great resemblance in structure and content with the Neo-Latin texts found at St John's Co-Cathedral. Maybe one can speak of an international style of eulogies for heroes. It was quite a common idea to depict sea battles on sepulchral monuments and slabs at St John's Conventual Church. Grand Master Carafa's monument is a most splendid example of a claim to heroism and his bust stands in front of a depiction of the Battle of the Dardanelles.

More than 800 persons attended the funerary procession of Van Heemskerck, whereby many onlookers were present along the route. For the first time an admiral received a state funeral since William of Orange in 1584. But Van Heemskerck had set a trend in which the ultimate honour for a supreme commander and sea hero was to be a monument and a funeral at the expense of the state. Formerly, the rewards for heroism for the living officers were, for example, a gold medal on a golden chain, a silver beaker or an engraved silver dish. A surviving captain could receive a golden or a silver flute, but they would have preferred a share of the spoils. In case the hero had paid with his life, his widow and orphans would receive a year's income.¹⁵

The monument of Van Heemskerck was sculpted by Hendrick de Keyser, who would design and execute

most of the ten monuments for Dutch sea heroes of his time. The Battle of Gibraltar would be depicted several times by leading artists. The admiralty of Zeeland had tapestries made with scenes of their greatest naval victories, not unlike the frescoes in the Grand Master's Palace at Valletta.¹⁶ One can observe in paintings of Dutch sea heroes a convention regarding the background. A wild and stormy sea stands for victory and survival, a calm sea for the death of the hero.

Piet Hein, after his successful capture of the Silver Fleet, was presented with a number of golden medals, a golden chain with a golden whistle. He was taken on a victory tour through the cities of Leiden, Haarlem and Amsterdam, where he was loudly cheered by the populace. The frontier cities along the Spanish border were encouraged to participate in such celebrations, in as loud and colourful a manifestation as they could, preferably with cannon shot and fireworks, just to make fun of the Spaniards. In London and Basel, Dutch delegates let off fireworks. Only the delegates in Venice declined, because according to local custom a proper celebration should last at least three days, and consequently would cost a fortune. The tight-belt mentality of the Dutch prohibited such extravaganzas.

A cult around the person of Piet Hein came about, and right after his return portraits were made, printed and distributed on pamphlets. Paintings, etches, sketches and engravings were commissioned by princes and paupers, depicting Piet Hein and his heroic deeds. There was no limit to what the cult of the popular sea hero could achieve through prints, medals, portraits and paintings, all public expressions of victory of the living sea hero and sorrow at his demise. Throughout the whole country prayers of gratitude were said in his honour in churches and there would be fireworks, salute shots and tolling of bells. In magnitude this would be at the same scale as the festivities round a popular patron saint in Malta. In Malta, a knight-hero could obtain his own portrait, a state funeral and a sepulchral slab, but no further public expressions of mourning, let alone popular ones, were carried out.

To have similar honours, and such popular ones too, bestowed on a heroic knight of the Order, would of course be out of place. Piet Hein had also to attend two grand banquets given by the West Indian Company (WIC) and the city council of Amsterdam. Here there are some similarities, as a heroic knight would be invited to a banquet at the Grand Master's Palace if celebrations were in order, and they would be given a portrait, not of themselves but of the Grand Master. Vincenzo Martelli of Florence was such a successful



Lieutenant Admiral General Cornelis Tromp depicted in this painting in Roman attire

admiral (and before that a celebrated general of mounted troops stationed in Germany) that he was invited at the Grand Master's Palace and was given a rostrated crown during a triumphal reception by the Grand Master.¹⁷

Remarkably enough, the death of Piet Hein in July 1629 produced just a handful of drawings, pamphlets and coins. Just six months before he had been extremely popular. Possibly, the down side of being popular had caught up with him. A number of sailors, formerly under his command during the Silver Fleet success, were dissatisfied about their share of the profit and had used his portrait to demonise and threaten him. There is a parallel in Malta with regard to demonising the enemy. Throughout St John's Co-Cathedral one can notice images of Ottomans, in a stereotype manner (bald head, big moustache, menacing look, the physical build of an *Übermensch*). To demonise effectively, one first has to make a stereotype caricature of that person or ethnic group. Once that is established, one may reproduce and distribute that image and start the demonisation process. Due to such a process Piet Hein had to move town and take up a position of lieutenant-admiral of another admiralty.

However, Piet Hein's funeral at Delft was bigger than that of his colleague admiral Van Heemskerck. On 4 July 1629 his helmet, rapier, gloves, spurs, armour

and commander's staff were carried in procession by other captains, and flags of conquered corsair ships were carried in front of the coffin, which was covered by a drapery and carried by sixteen captains as pallbearers. Behind followed relatives, officials, delegates, commissioners of the WIC, admiralty, State-General, provincial states, Council of State and the magistrates of Delft – in total 985 couples. He was buried at the Oude Kerk at Delft and his sepulchral monument included his coat of arms, his armoury, other military paraphernalia and attributes, and three captured flags. In Malta there were likewise funeral processions for grand masters, admirals and the highest ranking knights.

Here an example of what was regarded as exemplary heroism of members of the Order of St John:

“The bailiff Spinola, general of the squadron, embarking on the 15th of February 1700, spies a man-of-war belonging to the enemy off Sicily and comes up with her by hard rowing. The admiral-galley which followed him close, having lost its main sail by a gust of wind, Spinola resolved to board her. The engagement was bloody on both sides. The commander, Spinola's brother, receives a mortal wound. The grand prior of Messina Doria fought leaning upon his *valet de chambre*, being so very old that he could not stand unsupported. The *valet de chambre* is killed, and the prior holds with one hand upon the frame of wood that sustains the compass and continues fighting. Victory was going to be declared for the knights when the enemy's ship bears with all its force upon the admiral-galley and splits it. A south wind rises and blows a terrible storm which disperses the squadron. The commander Javon, captain of the *St Paul*, goes to the succour of those who were cast away in the admiral-galley and saves fifty of them, among whom were general Spinola, the commander Broffia, and the chevalier de St Germain and resolves to stay in the same place to get off the rest, notwithstanding the remonstrances of the pilot, who assures them they were in great danger, ‘I shall be happy enough, (says the captain) if I lose my life in saving but a single man of them.’ The wind however drove him away in spite of all his endeavours. Twenty two knights and above 500 men, both officers as well as soldiers, perished either in the engagement or the wreck. The other galleys are driven by the tempest towards the Levant; they join again at Augusta and return to Malta. The Grand Master provides for the subsistence of the families of such of his subjects as had perished in this engagement.”¹⁸

Cornelis Tromp and Michiel Adriaanszoon de Ruyter

became exemplary of the Dutch cult of sea heroes through their successes against England and Sweden in the 1660s. Especially De Ruyter's ‘Raid on the Medway’ topped all popularity. This ‘Dutch Raid’ in June 1667 during the Second Anglo-Dutch War, was a surprise attack on English ships and shipyards. They bombarded Sheerness, sailed straight up the Thames, further to Medway and into the navy harbour of Chatham. There they sunk four ships-of-the-line and hijacked the flagship *HMS Royal Charles* and sailed it to Holland. An etch was made of the pair, sitting in a triumphal chariot with the Dutch Maiden, very much alike the Flemish tapestry at St John's Co-Cathedral, the ‘Triumph of Charity’, designed by Peter Paul Rubens. De Ruyter was made a member of the Order of St Michael by King Louis XIV in 1666. An immense amount of the usual pamphlets, poems, paintings were produced to honour the hero of all heroes. A printed image of De Ruyter shows him riding the waves on a triumphal chariot in the shape of a scallop, drawn by a number of hippocampi and surrounded by Neptune and other allegorical figures of the sea. The whole is embellished with scenes of the Raid on the Medway.¹⁹

The Secretary of State Johan de Witt exploited the heroism of the fleet leaders and the success of the fleet.



The pamphlet published to commemorate the Dutch sea hero Admiral Michiel Adriaanszoon de Ruyter in which he was praised for his accomplishments

Johan de Witt had not forgotten the lesson of Julius Caesar. De Ruyter had to report to the Council of State, but presented only a 'slimmed down' version and would send de Witt the full report and all his personal notes and observations. De Witt then would edit these reports as he saw fit for his own propaganda purposes and publish and distribute these in the popular pamphlet form. De Witt did so with the excuse that there was a great curiosity among the population and thus he, the great leader, satisfied the population's need for news and gossip about the fleet and its commanders and at the same time spread the fame and reputation of De Ruyter far and wide.²⁰ De Ruyter's son created a biography from his ship's journals and correspondence, which became a bestseller.

Michiel Adriaanszoon de Ruyter was undoubtedly the apex of Dutch popular heroism. Besides being a hero, he was also seen as an exemplary personality. De Ruyter, a true and sober Calvinist, always remained a modest man although he was highly esteemed by foreign nations. He could not be distinguished in his daily dress from a common captain. Likewise, his household was on a modest scale, notwithstanding the fortune he had gained over the years, and he was never accompanied by more than one man-servant.²¹ In comparison to many other Dutch captains and admirals, De Ruyter was a genuinely pious and psalm singing Calvinist, in a world where sailors were more given to Bacchus and Venus and knew as much of the Bible as of the Koran.²² His charity was also a very well-known factor in his life. After every safe return he would give a donation to the poor-box. His donations increased as De Ruyter grew older, wiser and richer. It was remarked that his generosity was very creditable, since in orthodox Calvinism there is no concept of salvation through good works. In contrast, Grand Master Jean de Valette had prepared for his death in a much different manner and he had hope indeed for salvation through good deeds (see below).

Admiral De Ruyter would be the last Dutch sea hero to receive a state funeral and a monument at the expense of the state. He died in 1676 during the Battle of the Etna and De Ruyter's funeral would be comparable with that of de Valette, including boats and a very long funerary procession. He was mourned deeply since he had been there for a whole generation and was victorious in numerous wars and battles in Europe, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. As the commander of a Dutch-Spanish fleet in 1676 he went to the help of the Spanish to quash the Messina Revolt. After that he fought the French, first at the Battle of Stromboli and the second time at the Battle of Agosta. Here he was

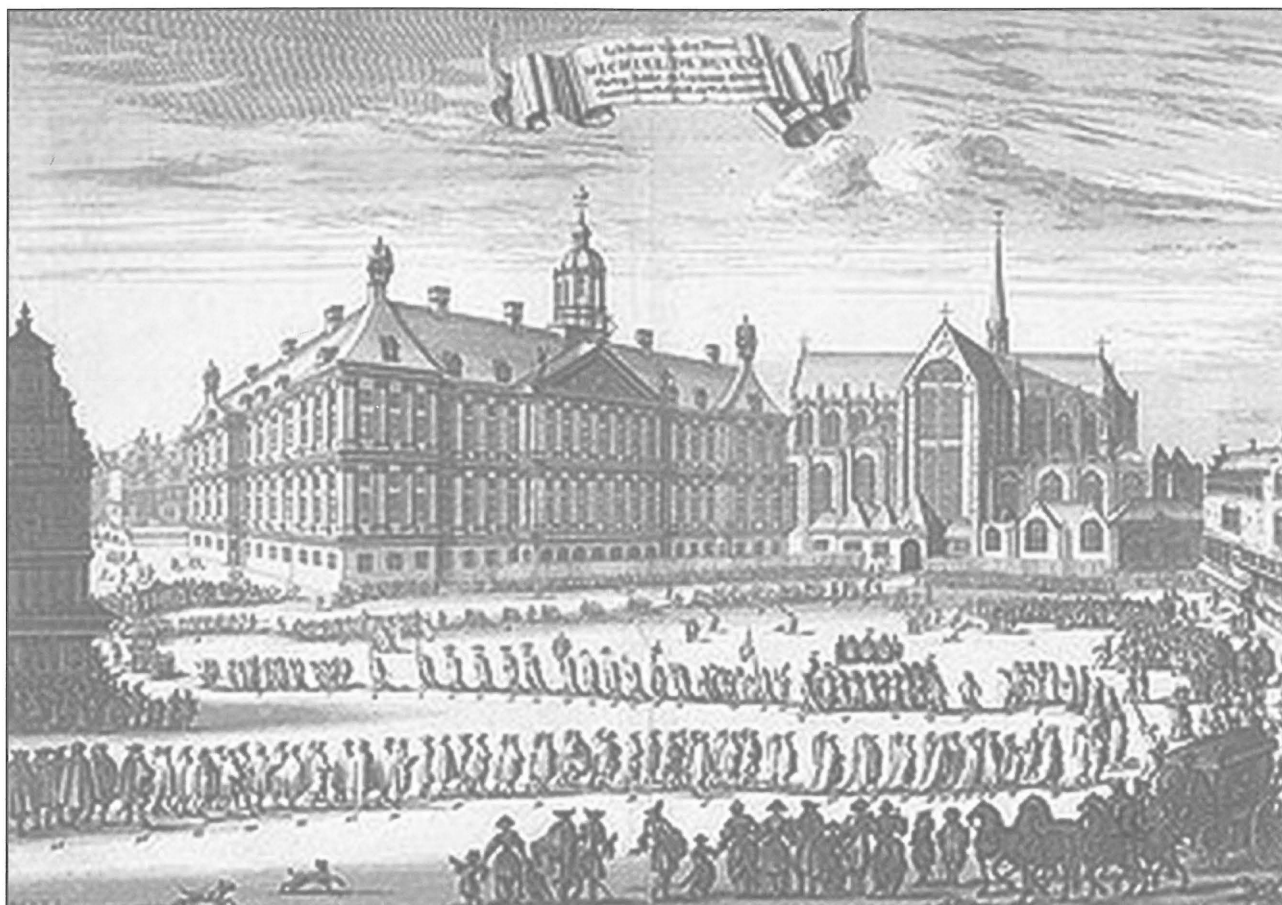


Galley slaves with their hands bound behind their backs in the monument of Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner in St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta

fatally wounded when hit by a cannonball in the left leg and was thereafter compared to Achilles, due to the wound sustained to his leg. Poets rhymed that the Dutch Achilles was wounded in his foot but the nation in its heart. His burial took place on 18 March 1677 at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. Cornelis Tromp, his fellow hero, would succeed him as the supreme commander.

Although De Ruyter had died on 29 April 1676 off Agosta, his body only arrived home on 30 January 1677, a good nine months later. His embalmed body survived another sea battle and a long wintry voyage on board of his own ship *De Eendracht* (Concord). Regarding the monument and state funeral, as already pointed out, he was the last to enjoy such treatment. It was a political decision to stop this trend at its height of popularity. From now onwards the state would be more sober in its expression of public mourning for sea heroes. Possibly the personal propaganda of Johan de Witt through the newsletter provided by De Ruyter was something to be avoided in future.

On 4 February 1677 the remains of De Ruyter started the last part of the journey. His ship *De Eendracht* departed from Hellevoetsluis under a thunderous volley of cannon salutes to sail via Rotterdam to Amsterdam through mostly frozen rivers to arrive on its final destination on 16 February. He was lying in state at



The state funeral of Admiral De Ruyter showing the long line of participants who accompanied the sea hero's corps to its resting place

his home address in Amsterdam, drawing huge crowds who wanted to pay him their last respects in person. On the day of his funeral, 18 February, nine and a half months after his demise, the streets of Amsterdam were packed. An impressive funeral cortege accompanied De Ruyter to his sepulchral monument at the Nieuwe Kerk. All the symbols belonging to his heroism were carried along – his spurs, iron gloves, rapier, helmet and armour. A horse clad in black drapery reaching the ground, showing his coat of arms on four sides, opened the cortege and was led by two lieutenants-general. A cuirassier dressed in armour and carrying the commander's rod separated the head of the funerary procession, followed by the coffin, its black drapery covered with eight coats of arms, borne alternatively by two groups of eighteen city criers as pallbearers, accompanied by sixteen captains. The four corners of the drapery were held by four officers of the various admiralties. Directly behind the coffin walked Constantijn Huygens, the substitute of Prince William II, and all the governors of the Admiralty of Amsterdam. Next came the members of the family and friends, as well as the ambassadors of Spain and Denmark. Then the representatives of the government, Council of State, regents, members of the nobility and

gentry, the bailiff, the mayor of Amsterdam, judges, magistrates, council members and representatives of other city councils and functionaries of Amsterdam, preachers, ministers and deacons of the Dutch, Flemish, Wallonian and English Church, governors and lawyers of the East and West Indian trade companies, professors and lectures of the universities of Amsterdam, servants and staff of the Admiralty of Amsterdam, sea officers, church officials, brothers of the seafarers guild, former government officials, consuls of Spain and Genoa, members of the Jewish community, important citizenry and merchants. At the back "a sheer endless mass of un-invited burghers closed the cortege in a mixed and disorderly fashion". On the Dam, a large square in the centre of Amsterdam stood a detachment of a few hundred soldiers in the city's livery in front of the Nieuwe Kerk to keep order. Here too, the populace had gathered and occupied every possible vantage point from balconies, roofs, trees and stairs, to watch the meandering cortege entering the church. The coffin, banners and flags were placed in the choir, which was draped in black. All were seated according to order and rank. Near the end of the service, at the moment the coffin was lowered into the crypt, the soldiers outside fired their guns in three volleys of salute, to



The effigy of Admiral De Ruyter capping his tomb shows him in full armour

be answered by a frigate on the nearby river IJ, firing all its 24 cannons in salute three times. Church bells tolled incessantly and at the same time on all the navy's ships in the harbour the flag was lowered half-mast. According to tradition, De Ruyter's coat of arms, his armoury, his helmet and his banners were placed in an open niche above the sepulchral monument. The large admiral's flag was placed on a higher position than all the other banners, which ritual ended the hours long ceremony.²³

To keep in tune, here follows a description of De Vertot regarding the death and funeral of Grand Master Jean de Valette in a very vivid account, of which an edited excerpt: ²⁴

"During the summer of 1568, on 19th July, Grand Master De Valette rode on horseback to St Paul's Bay for a relaxing day of hawking. He developed a violent fever caused by sunstroke. After three weeks of suffering, his strength finally gave way and he could no longer prolong the inevitable. He prepared himself, as a good Christian and a true Religious, for Death. He received all sacraments, denounced all property and freed fifty of his slaves. He had used part of his private capital of 12.000 *livres* to embellish the

Chapel of Our Lady of Victory in Valetta, his desired burial place, and he gave the rest of his money to his servants. He gathered around him the Council and the commanders and principal knights, and admonished them to keep their unity and peace among themselves. He encouraged his nephews to take his piety and courage as an example. Then he dismissed everyone and listened only to those things related to his salvation. On the approaches of Death, he called upon his good angel for support and fought his last combat in the entire confidence of the Lord's mercy. He shouted his last words 'Jesus' and 'Mary' and died on 21st August 1568. His body was laid in state in the church of St Lawrence in Vittoriosa, in the Chapel of St Mary de Philermo. The next day the elections for the new Grand Master started and Pietro del Monte was elected on 23rd August of the same year. His first duty of piety was to pay the funeral honours of his predecessor. De Valette's body was brought on board the admiral's galley, of which all equipment and masts had been removed. It was towed by two armed galleys throughout the Grand Harbour, around the tip of the peninsula on which Valletta was built and into the Marsaxmetto Harbour. The galleys were hung with black cloths and carrying ensigns and banners, De Valette's trophies of war, taken from the Ottomans and other Infidels.



A hero's monument in Malta – the monument commemorating the famous Venteian Admiral Angelo Emo erected in the church of Our of Victories in Valletta

Another two galleys followed, once property of the late Grand Master, also covered with black cloths and funeral ornaments. These last two ships carried the new Grand Master, the Council, the commanders and principal knights, De Valette's household, his officers and servants. The household, officers and servants, all deeply in mourning, went ashore first, carrying torches and standards taken from the Ottomans. The clergy followed in solemn procession, carrying De Valette's corpse while chanting. Then came the new Grand Master, the Council and all the knights. They proceeded to the chapel of Our Lady of Victory where his remains were deposited. A divine service with all the ceremonies and honours due to the memory of such a great man was performed."

For a knight of the Order to die in battle may not

automatically lead to heroism, but surely to martyrdom. At St John's Co-Cathedral at Valletta we can witness a number of sepulchral slabs dedicated to very young knights who died in the defence of the faith. In one of them, the parents of the young knight Francesco Maffei of Rome, Augustino Maffei and Dionora Cavalcantes, had placed a sepulchral slab in 1634 in memory of their dearest son who, in a victorious naval battle over the Turks near Leptis, was pierced through by an iron-clad mortar. The last line of the inscribed text suggests that Francesco went straight into Heaven for his triumph and therefore martyrdom could be claimed.²⁵

Actual heroism is difficult to verify, because of inflation of heroism and heroic inflation. Deeds and sayings have over time contributed to the image of invincible Dutch sea heroes. There always seemed someone around to record the last saying of a Dutch sea hero, even if he was killed instantly! There was unfortunately no trend to note the last words of an Order's sea hero and to publish them in an act of popular culture of memory. One of the few to utter a recorded last word was Grand Master Jean de Valette (see above). Jan van Galen was reported to have said: "It was easy to die victoriously for the fatherland". Wolter Jan Gerrit, baron of Bentinck (1745-1781) had uttered: "I rather risk everything and go down [with my ship] than to strike the flag or to flee." Jan Carel Josephus van Speyk (1802-1831), at the moment his ship was being captured, stroke the flint and just before he blew up his ship, himself and his enemies, he cried: "I rather blow myself up [than surrender]!!!". Maarten Harpertzoon Tromp (1598-1653) was shot by an English sniper and although witnesses said he died instantly, his last words were: "I have done, keep courage".²⁶

The Dutch shared such sentiments in general, but were also quite practical. If one was regarded as an incompetent captain and who died during battle, the Dutch saw this as an act of stupidity, the vacancy quickly filled. A competent captain who died in battle was regarded as a great loss, and fame was his. To be killed at sea was a great way to finalise one's career, followed by a state funeral and a marble sepulchral monument. Who died on land would forgo this honour and was doomed to oblivion, since without sea battles there are no sea heroes.

The end of the series of Anglo-Dutch wars in 1774 heralded also the end of monuments for sea heroes at the expense of the state.²⁷ Now the eternal memory of the sea heroes, both the Dutch and of the Order, is continued by tourism, as they have become important

attractions. Both fleets also shared a common faith in the end, succumbing to Napoleon Bonaparte, the Dutch at the end of the Dutch Republic in 1795, the Order's at the end of their Catholic Republic in Malta in 1798.

The author

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Notes and references

- 1 H. Nicholson, *The Knights Hospitaller* (Woodbridge, 2001), 43.
- 2 R. Prud'homme van Reine, *Zeehelden* (Amsterdam, 2005), 13.
- 3 C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800* (London, 1965), xx.
- 4 Ibid., 332–6
- 5 R. de Vertot, *The history of the Knights of Malta*, ii (London, 1728; facsimile edition Malta, 1989), Old and New Statutes, title XX, §30, 189.
- 6 Ibid., §84, 194.
- 7 Ibid., §10, 186.
- 8 Ibid., §17, 187.
- 9 Prud'homme van Reine, 50.
- 10 Ibid., 52.
- 11 J. Muscat & A. Cuschieri, *Naval activities of the Knights of St John 1530-1798* (Malta, 2002), 145.
- 12 de Vertot, § 8, 186.
- 13 Prud'homme van Reine, 51.
- 14 Ibid., 48.
- 15 Ibid., 49.
- 16 Ibid., 47
- 17 D. Munro, *Memento Mori* (Malta, 2005), 117. *ROSTRATA CORONA* – A rostrated crown was in classical times a crown ornamented with small figures of beaks-heads of ships, which was given to the man who first boarded an enemy's vessel. The beak-head was the extended prow of ancient galleys. In the sense of the fleet of the Order, likewise crowns were given to sea heroes.
- 18 de Vertot, ii, Book 13, 103.
- 19 Prud'homme van Reine, 109.
- 20 Ibid., 104.
- 21 Boxer, 41.
- 22 Ibid., 82.
- 23 Prud'homme van Reine, 121–4.
- 24 de Vertot, ii, title XIII, 45–8.
- 25 Munro, 195.
- 26 <http://www.nieuwekerk.nl/nl/#/nl/dnka/interieur/zeehelden.htm>
- 27 Prud'homme van Reine, 120.