I

The First Military Actions Overseas (1590–1602/1621)

In the first twenty years of the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648), the conflict with Spain gradually shifted from the provinces of Holland and Zeeland, the core area of the Dutch Revolt, to the edges of the Northern Netherlands, and the contours of what would become the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands — commonly referred to as the Dutch Republic — emerged. That period saw the creation not only of a strong army that was increasingly able to repel the enemy but also a navy whose operational capability extended far beyond its own coastal waters. With initial help from the English the transition from a defensive to an offensive phase in the war would eventually pave the way for maritime actions against the Spanish and Portuguese outside Europe.

This first chapter examines the key question of how Dutch rebels were able to shift from their initial, essentially defensive stance to a position of strength that enabled them to carry the fight to the Iberians in places far beyond Europe's borders. The involvement of private entrepreneurs in that process was significant and not to be underestimated. The States General lacked the financial resources for large-scale overseas campaigns. If war were to be fought there was no option but to work with merchants and traders whose main motivation was profit. But what did this collaboration of the mercantile and the military look like and what resources did the respective parties deploy?

In Africa, Asia and the Americas the Dutch faced Spanish and Portuguese adversaries whose extensive empire-building had been in progress since the late fifteenth century. In 1580 the Portuguese and Spanish crowns were united in a personal union, bringing the whole of the Iberian peninsula and both countries' overseas possessions under the control of the Spanish Habsburg monarchs. The Iberian Union thus established between the two great 'colonial' powers would last until 1640. We shall see how that Hispano-Lusitanian empire was built and how the Iberians had organised its defence.

From there we move on to look at the combined Anglo-Dutch expeditions to the Iberian peninsula's Atlantic waters, operations that were the prelude to the later Dutch actions in the Atlantic and Asian theatres of trade and war. In the final years of the sixteenth century, several Dutch fleets and squadrons sailed to diverse overseas destinations, setting the stage for later expansion in the East and West. Problematically, the private companies undertaking such ventures increasingly competed with each other instead of the Spanish and Portuguese. The solution, concluded the States General, was to persuade them to join forces in a large monopolistic cartel that united both commercial and military objectives. Which raises the question of whether Dutch expansion overseas was the result of deliberate strategy or the outcome of an unconscious process — an issue addressed at the end of the chapter.

Seville, at the mouth of Guadalquivir, where the *Flota de Indias* from America arrived every year. Painting by Alonso Sánchez Coello, *c.*1576-1588.

The Spanish-Portuguese Empire

There was a certain ambivalence in the Dutch Republic's early maritime expansion. On one hand its merchants were keen to claim a share of the lucrative trade in tropical products; on the other, the Republic had an interest in challenging its Iberian enemy in its overseas empire. In 1598 these commercial and martial interests merged in an expedition planned by the Zeeland merchant and ship-owner Balthasar de Moucheron. The aim of the enterprise was the capture of the Portuguese-held island of Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea. De Moucheron had already been trading in West Africa for several years and now sought to extend the activities of his recently-founded Veerse Compagnie into East Asia. To do that he would need a base. Lying on the equator, Príncipe was, he thought, the ideal place for trade in the Gulf of Guinea and would also make a very useful mid-way station for ships en route to the East.[1] The States General supported his plan with five well-armed vessels: de Moucheron himself was to pay the wages of 500 seamen and soldiers and provide their equipment. In August 1598 the squadron, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Julius Cleerhagen, arrived in the roadstead of Santo António, Príncipe's administrative centre. The unsuspecting Portuguese governor and his officers accepted Cleerhagen's invitation to board, only to find themselves held at cutlass point and forced to surrender the island. Julius Cleerhagen had taken Príncipe without a shot being fired and the Republic had acquired its first overseas colony. Almost at once, the occupying forces set about building a fort and laying out fields to grow food for provisioning the East Indiamen who would soon be putting in at the island.

On the neighbouring isle of São Tomé the Portuguese governor, Don Antonio de Meneses, was soon informed of the Dutch action and sent a 500-strong force to recapture Príncipe. In early November he

arrived in the Bay of Santo António and attacked the Dutch from both land and sea. Cleerhagen's troops, entrenched around the half-finished fortress, withstood the assault, albeit with great difficulty. To make matters worse, in the course of the siege Cleerhagen himself and many of his weakened men succumbed to tropical diseases. De Moucheron's nephew Cornelis assumed command, jointly with Joris van Spilbergen, who was later to play an important part in the fighting in Asia. They hoped for the arrival of the reinforcements from the Dutch Republic that had been promised on their departure. But by the end of November that help had still not materialised and they surrendered in exchange for an honourable retreat.[2] Thus the Republic's first overseas colony came to a sorry end, the enemy and the tropical climate having both been disastrously underestimated. Nonetheless, the Dutch had taken the war to their traditional enemy in its overseas empire and would continue to do so. But what did that overseas Spanish-Portuguese empire look like and what kind of opposition could the Dutch expect to encounter there?

Before Dutch ships ever ventured outside European waters, both Spain and Portugal had already established extensive networks of colonies and trading posts in Africa, the Americas and Asia. That expansion had begun during the final phase of the Reconquista, the reclamation of Iberian territory from the Moors who had crossed from North Africa via the Strait of Gibraltar and moved into the peninsula centuries earlier. The Portuguese were the first to claim land outside Europe, conquering the North African port of Ceuta in 1415. Then, for nearly a century, they roved the mid- and south Atlantic, discovering Madeira, the Azores, the Cape Verde archipelago and other uninhabited islands, and exploring the West African coast.[3]

During those voyages, mariners systematically collected astronomical, geographical and nautical data. Cartographers recorded the information in maps and descriptions that would be used for navigation by new expeditions. That first phase of expansion was a gradual process of trial and error, in which the lines were drawn for further development of Portuguese power in the Atlantic.[4] Forts were built on the islands and along the coasts to protect settlers and merchants from European competitors as well as indigenous attacks from the African hinterland. In 1488, with a small fleet of three ships, Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of Africa, and entered the waters of the Indian Ocean. Ahead of him lay the sea route to India, though it would be another ten years before Vasco da Gama sailed via that route to reach the west coast of India and usher in the second phase of Portuguese expansion.

Spain's acquisition of overseas territory was more gradual and also took a different course. In 1402 the French explorer Jean de Béthencourt occupied the island of Lanzarote for Henry III, king of Castile. But not until 1494 did the Spanish have all the Canary Islands in their possession. Like the Portuguese elsewhere in the Atlantic, they built defences in strategic places. Unlike the Portuguese, capturing the Canaries would be the extent of Spain's overseas endeavours until the end of the fifteenth century. Only once the Reconquista was completed in 1492 was the next step taken. In that year Christopher Columbus sailed from southern Spain with a Castile-funded squadron of three ships on a voyage of discovery. He reprovisioned in the Canaries then headed westwards across the Atlantic, believing that Asia lay on the other side, though what he actually found were islands in the Caribbean. More voyages followed and large parts of the Caribbean and mainland America were discovered. The Canary Islands remained the principal point of departure for travel to America until the steam age. Later, Dutch sailors would also set out from the Canaries and the more southerly Cape Verde Islands and use the northeasterly trade winds to reach America.

Following the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope by Dias and the discovery of America by Columbus, a dispute arose between Spain and Portugal over the exclusive right to the new territories. Both used their respective discoveries to claim a monopoly on trade and shipping in the Atlantic. The result of their wrangling was the Treaty of Tordesillas, agreed with papal approval in 1494, by which the two states divided the world outside Europe between themselves. Spain received everything to the west of an imaginary line that ran down the centre of the Atlantic and cut across eastern Brazil, while Portugal was entitled to everything to the east of it.[5] A few decades later, when both countries had explored the Indian and Pacific oceans as well, a second line defining the Spanish and Portuguese spheres of influence in Asia was agreed upon and ratified by the Treaty of Zaragoza in 1529. By the terms of that pact, Spain kept the Philippines but everything between the Indonesian Archipelago and the Tordesillas line was part of the Portuguese trading area.[6] Broadly speaking, what it came down to was that Spain was entitled to America minus Brazil, and Portugal to Africa and Asia minus the Philippines. Needless to say, other European states, including the Dutch Republic, took a dim view of that arrangement and declined to acknowledge it.

Totonac bearers carry equipment and supplies for conquistadors in Mexico. Various indigenous peoples played important roles as allies in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec and Inca empires. Coloured drawing from the manuscript by Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de la tierra firme* (also referred to as the 'Durán Codex'), 1579.

The colonial empire that Spain built in the Americas was a dependency of the Crown alone and from the start it was dynastic and imperial in character. Initially it was limited to Cuba, Hispaniola and other large islands in the Caribbean. But once the Spanish set foot on the mainland, expansion in Central and South America was extremely rapid. In a mere twenty years, between 1519 and 1539, conquistadors subjugated the Aztec empire in present-day Mexico and the Inca empire that stretched down the western side of South America. To enable the comparatively few settlers to control the immense area and its indigenous peoples the Spanish built fortified townships. Those indigenous Americans who were not killed by European diseases were converted to Catholicism and incorporated into the Spanish empire. The Spanish Crown governed its overseas territories remotely from Seville through the *Consejo de Indias*, the Council of the Indies, which established the legislation and administrative order of the colonies. The overseas empire was divided into *audiencias* or captaincies, each with its own jurisdiction, and within them, cities governed by a *cabildo*, a town council made up of colonists. When controlling all those units from a distance proved problematic, the Spanish Crown split its overseas empire into two large parts. In 1535 the Viceroyalty of New Spain was created, a vast swathe of territory stretching north from Panama to include much of present-day Central America, Mexico, and North America. In 1542 the Viceroyalty of Peru was formed, comprising present-day Peru and most of the Spanish Empire in South America.[7]

Spain's American colonies were particularly important to the Crown because of the great wealth of precious metals they possessed. In Potosí, high in the Peruvian Andes, huge veins of silver were struck in 1545, followed in 1546 by the rich silver mines of Zacatecas in New Spain. The viceroy of Peru succinctly summarised the potential of the silver from Potosí: 'to chastise the Turk, to humiliate the Moor, to make Flanders tremble and to terrify England'.[8] Philip II of Spain and later his son Philip III were in dire need of those precious metals from the New World to finance their wars in Europe, including their conflict with the rebels in the Northern Netherlands.[9]

The silver from Potosí was transported by mule across the Andes to the port of Arica on the Pacific coast, and then by ship to the isthmus of Panama and

Acapulco. There, some of the silver was loaded onto galleons and shipped across the Pacific to Manila, where it was used in the lucrative silk trade with China. But most of the Potosí silver was carried by mule train across the Panama isthmus to Nombre de Dios on the Caribbean coast. Silver from the Zacatecas mines went overland to the more northerly port of Vera Cruz. From 1564, fleets left Spain twice a year to sail via the Canary Islands to the Caribbean ports to pick up the silver and other products and bring them to Havana in Cuba, where the two fleets combined. At the end of August, well before the start of the hurricane season, the Spanish treasure fleet put to sea, its forty or so merchantmen being convoyed by twelve heavily armed galleons via the Azores to Spain.[10]

Portugal's overseas empire had a more commercial character than Spain's and was also more coastal than land-oriented. Only Brazil, discovered in 1500 by Pedro Álvares Cabral, would develop in the sixteenth century into a colony somewhat comparable to Spain's in South America. Brazil was also divided into captaincies (provinces) that were later administered by a governor — comparable to the Spanish viceroys. Brazil proved to be ideally suited to the cultivation of sugar cane and became the most important sugar producer in the world. To protect the colony from attack by European competitors, the Portuguese built a series of forts along the coast, those at Salvador and Recife being the most important.[11] These and other fortifications were built in the medieval manner (square with high, straight stone walls and towers at the corners) and could not withstand the heavy artillery that was starting to appear in the sixteenth century.

In West Africa, Portuguese power, as mentioned earlier, was limited to a series of forts and fortified trading posts built with the permission of African rulers. Only in Angola did the Portuguese manage to establish limited territorial power. From their forts they traded with Africans. In addition to gold, ivory, wax and other African products, the Portuguese also bought slaves here, who were shipped across the Atlantic and put to work on Brazilian sugar plantations.

Following Vasco da Gama's first expedition to India in 1498, the Portuguese began building a trading empire in Asia to supply spices to the European market. In a bid to eliminate competition they attacked the ancient Arab-Indian network in Asia that controlled the trade routes through the Middle East and Egypt to Europe. The Portuguese built fortifications in various places in Asia. They also stationed a fleet between the west coast of India and the Arabian peninsula to cut off native traders. Between 1509 and 1515, Afonso de Albuquerque conquered Diu and Goa on the west coast of India, Malacca, and finally Hormuz, giving the Portuguese more control over the trade routes from India and Malacca to East Africa and the Persian Gulf. Albuquerque's attacks on Aden and in the Red Sea failed, however, leaving the Arab-Indian trade route to and from Egypt intact.[12] After the conquest of Malacca, smaller expeditions followed to the Moluccas, where the most

A Spanish 8 reales or 'piece of eight' (the largest coin), a thaler (left) and three stuivers from a fishing boat which sank in the Zuider Zee in the early seventeenth century and was found near Emmeloord in a piece of reclaimed land. Silver from America was a popular means of payment, particularly in the trade with Asia and the Levant, but also in the Dutch Republic's regional commerce and fishing.

precious spices came from. Until 1530 those expeditions also resulted in forts being built, particularly on the island of Ternate.

Elsewhere in the Indonesian Archipelago, Portuguese merchants entered the pepper markets. They established trading contacts with China, Japan, the Mughal Empire, Persia, Arakan, Pegu, Siam and Tonkin, although those variously-sized continental and maritime empires only allowed the Portuguese to establish factories — fortified trading posts in coastal areas — and merchant communities.[13]

By around 1580, Portugal's trading empire in Asia reached its greatest extent, stretching from Mozambique on the coast of East Africa to Nagasaki in Japan. Goa and its surrounding hinterland was the major power and administrative centre of the *Estado da India* and also the seat of the Portuguese viceroy in Asia. From there, trade and shipping with the other parts of the Asian network were organised. Jan Huygen van Linschoten, who would pave the way for the first Dutch expeditions to Asia via the Cape of Good Hope, was resident in the Portuguese enclave on the west coast of India from 1583 to 1589. There he observed how the Portuguese empire functioned in Asia and recorded the information in his *Itinerario*, a virtual trader's manual of nautical, geographical and economic data, published in 1596. It was translated into English as *John Huighen van Linschoten, His discours of voyages into ye Easte and West Indies*, published in 1598.[14] Following Goa as the most important fortified trade hubs from which the Portuguese ran their trading empire in the East were the island of Mozambique, Malacca and Macau. Besides sending soldiers and building fortifications to defend their possessions in Asia, the Portuguese also recruited thousands of mestizos, descendants of relationships between Europeans and indigenous women.[15]

By far the most support in the form of men, ships and materiel had to come from Portugal itself, however, a country with 1.4 million inhabitants at the end of the sixteenth century, of whom 120,000 lived in Lisbon.[16] A country, moreover, that in 1580 after a bitter war of succession had been forcibly integrated into an Iberian Union by Philip II of Spain. Yet that was not the reason for the decline of the Portuguese empire after 1580. The cause lies in Portugal's poor state finances and its small population, neither of which was sufficient to defend its overseas empire against every hostile action. By the late sixteenth century the empire was suffering from what the historian Paul Kennedy has called 'imperial overstretch' — just at the moment that the first Dutch expeditions sailed to Asia.[17]

In his famous travelogue *Itinerario, Voyage ofte Schipvaert naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien* (1596), Jan Huygen van Linschoten recorded a wealth of nautical and geographical data, which enabled the Dutch to find the sea route to the Indonesian Archipelago.

If European powers sought to attack or conquer Spain's colonies in the Americas, they had to equip large land armies that could operate far inland. But the Portuguese enclaves in Africa and Asia were on the coast and assailable from the sea. It was these differences between the Republic's Iberian adversaries that led the Dutch to focus primarily on poaching Portugal's overseas possessions while only rarely attacking the Spanish colonies and then never successfully — though, initially aided by the English, they did succeed in making Spain's intercontinental shipping much more difficult.

Anglo-Dutch Expeditions

In 1585, the Dutch Republic had been forced onto the defensive in the war against Spain. The fall of Antwerp to Spain had solidified the split between the southern and northern Netherlands. In the north-east and southwest the Spanish held the upper hand and it looked as if the days of the rebellious northern provinces were numbered. Vitally needed foreign aid came from England, also at war with Spain and bound by the terms of the Treaty of Nonsuch, signed that same year, to give military support to the break-away northern provinces. In return, the Dutch agreed to a number of English demands, including military participation, the pledge of several fortified towns, and support for English operations at sea. A second important event that greatly improved the Republic's position — although the Dutch had played only a minor role in it by blockading the Flanders coast[18] — was the destruction of the Spanish Armada in 1588 by the English. That victory put a decisive end to Spanish hegemony at sea.

With the Armada destroyed, the English intensified their naval campaign against Spain. Their main objective was to cripple Spanish shipping between the American colonies and the Iberian peninsula. As signatory to the Nonsuch treaty the Dutch were pledged to provide maritime support for English naval actions but were initially reluctant to do so. The Dutch navy's blue-water fleet was still too puny to play much of a role in any major engagement. When Francis Drake attacked the Iberian ports of La Coruña, Santander and Lisbon in 1589, for instance, a few troopships was the most that the Dutch could supply.[19]

Philip II's capture of Calais and several forward bases in Brittany and his support of Catholic rebels in France and Ireland gave fresh impetus to the war against Spain. Faced with that increasing threat, in 1596 England, France and the Dutch Republic signed the Triple Alliance, by which Elizabeth I of England, Henry IV of France, and the States General sought to improve coordination and concentrate their actions against their common enemy. The seaborne operations in which Dutch ships were involved as a result of that pact prefaced the development of a real seagoing fleet.

In 1596 disturbing news arrived from Spain: Philip II was preparing a new armada. Since 1588 an intensive programme of shipbuilding had already resulted in the completion of 69 galleons. To prevent those ships from ever sailing it was agreed that a pre-emptive strike on Cádiz should be carried out. Once that crucial base was disabled, moreover, the Iberian coast could be blockaded and Spain's treasure fleet could be intercepted. An Anglo-Dutch fleet of over 100 ships and more than 10,000 men set sail under the respective command of Charles Howard, 1st Earl of Nottingham, and Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex. The Republic's contribution to the fleet was a squadron of eighteen warships and six transports commanded by Lieutenant-Admiral Johan van Duivenvoorde.[20] At Cádiz, the Anglo-Dutch fleet destroyed two Spanish warships and captured two more. The Spanish did much of the attackers' work for them by burning two of their own warships and forty merchantmen rather than seeing them seized. Essex and his troops were landed and in a few hours had carried the city by storm. For the next fortnight it was sacked and pillaged, then finally burned to the ground. By that point Essex was running out of supplies and fit troops and was forced to abandon the valuable naval base. In many respects, therefore, the attack had failed in its purpose: once Essex had left, the treasure fleet slipped into San Lucar de Barrameda in the Guadalquivir estuary and two months later the second Spanish armada was ready to sail. Like its predecessor, it ran into gales and was forced back, badly damaged, to Spain's northern ports.[21]

In 1597 the States General agreed to take part in an English follow-up expedition. The objectives were the destruction of a third armada (which was being mounted in the Galician port of Ferrol from the remnants of the second), the occupation of the Azores, and the interception of the next treasure fleet. In July, Lord Thomas Howard sailed from Plymouth for the north coast of Spain with a fleet of 72 English warships and merchantmen, reinforced by a Dutch squadron of 10 warships, including some chartered vessels. From the start, everything went wrong. Instead of sailing to Ferrol, where the armada was anchored, the Anglo-Dutch fleet — which had been overtaken by a violent storm and damaged — made straight for the Azores, where Howard still hoped to capture the treasure fleet, even with his weakened squadron. But his attempts to take the islands of Terceira and São Miguel failed and he had no better

On 30 June 1596 (NS), after a fierce firefight off Cádiz, the Anglo-Dutch fleet sank two Spanish warships, the *San Felipe* and *Santo Tomás*, and captured the galleys *San Andrés* and *San Mateo*. In the painting the Dutch four-master *Neptunus* commanded by Admiral Johan van Duivenvoorde supports the English *Ark Royal*'s attack on the Spanish *San Felipe*. In fact the *Ark Royal*, the flagship of the English fleet that confronted the Spanish Armada in 1588, took no part in the Cádiz expedition but is included here as a symbol of English naval power. Painting by Aert Anthonisz, 1608.

luck with the treasure fleet, which due to bad weather was sighted by only four English ships, too few to overpower it. Howard returned to England empty-handed. The armada sailed from Ferrol to England's south coast, intending to intercept Howard's fleet, but yet again the weather intervened, and the Spanish ships were variously blown back to Spain's northern ports.[22]

Participation in the English expeditions in 1596 and 1597 had shown that at sea the Dutch Republic had successfully exchanged its defensive position for an offensive strategy. Side by side with England the navy could undertake actions far from its home ports. The next step was the independent deployment of ships that could not only carry out attacks around the Iberian peninsula but also operate in the Atlantic.

Opening Moves in the Atlantic

Yet it was not warships but the vessels of private entrepreneurs that made the Dutch Republic's first forays into the Atlantic to harry and attack Portuguese and Spanish targets. Not least amongst the reasons was Spain's embargo on trade with the Republic, which lasted from 1585 to 1589 and was repeated in 1598 and 1599. As a result, the lucrative trade in salt, spices, sugar and other tropical products that Dutch merchants purchased in Spanish and Portuguese ports was badly disrupted. That fuelled the desire to trade directly with the areas from which those commodities came. The first Dutch ships sailed into the Atlantic towards the end of the 1580s. In 1587, for example, at least three merchantmen sailed to Brazil intent on loading up with a cargo of sugar there, albeit illegally.[23] It must have been during those voyages that the first plans to challenge Spanish and Portuguese supremacy in Africa and America emerged.

The trading company of the Zeeland ship-owner Balthasar de Moucheron played an important part in that enterprise. De Moucheron, descendant of a merchant family from the Southern Netherlands, had fingers in a great many pies. He was active in the West Africa, Caribbean and Asia trade, owning several trading posts on Cape Verde and intent on expanding his commercial activities to the Gold Coast, where the Portuguese had a number of forts and controlled trade. In 1595 he sent Karel Hulscher with two well-armed ships to Elmina, the strongest Portuguese settlement on the Gold Coast. Hulscher's order was to capture Elmina Castle, as the fort there was known, but his landing party was ambushed and nearly all killed.[24] In 1598 de Moucheron tried once again to capture a base, this time the Portuguese-held island of Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea, but as described above, that attempt also failed.[25] The two attacks did, however, yield information that would be used a year later for a much larger expedition.

In 1599 the States General decided on a major attack on the shipping connections and Atlantic possessions of Spain and Portugal. The nautical knowledge such an expedition required was now available and the navy's seagoing fleet, supplemented by armed merchantmen, was considered strong enough to operate successfully overseas. Admiral Pieter van der Does, who led the fleet, was given an ambitious set of orders. He was to blockade the Iberian coast at La Coruña, seize the town and establish a base there, deal a devastating blow to the Spanish war fleet, and capture both the incoming and outgoing Spanish fleet. He was also expected to attack islands, towns and ports and carry off as much booty as possible. He could, if he thought it necessary, divide the fleet into smaller squadrons. Attacks on the Canary Islands and São Tomé were high on his commissioners' wish list. The Canaries were crucial to Spain's transatlantic voyages. São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea, with its many sugar plantations, was included, partly in hopes of interesting a squadron of privateers in the expedition, but the owners of those ships withdrew prematurely.[26]

Van der Does set sail with 73 ships in three squadrons, carrying 6,000 sailors, 1,600 soldiers, landing craft, guns, ammunition, a siege train, and two engineers for amphibious operations and investments.[27] On 11 June the fleet — the largest that the Republic had ever sent out — arrived before La Coruña in northern Spain. The troops landed successfully and occupied the lower part of the town. But the Spanish were forewarned of their arrival and had readied the defence of the upper town, putting it out of Dutch reach. The planned blockade also failed. The outgoing Spanish fleet had sailed for America four days before Van der Does arrived, and the incoming treasure fleet from Havana managed to reach the harbour safely. Van der Does found hardly any enemy ships in the Iberian coastal waters. After a failed attack