



New Netherland Institute  
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

## OLIVIER VAN NOORT THE FIRST DUTCH CIRCUMNAVIGATOR

By Peter Douglas



Most of us have heard of Ferdinand Magellan and Francis Drake, the first explorers to sail around the world, one Portuguese, the other English, but what about Olivier van Noort? Well, he was the first Dutchman to do this, between 1598 and 1601. Van Noort was born in Utrecht in 1568 and died in 1627 in Schoonhoven, South Holland, where he lies buried. In 1598 he was given command of an expedition of four ships for the purpose of voyaging to the South Sea (Pacific Ocean) to trade and to harry Spain's possessions and shipping.

Spanish treasure shipments in the Pacific were rarely attacked. The English and the French preferred to get to Asia via the Indian Ocean where there were more ports to stop for supplies and repairs. The result was that the Spanish were only challenged there by the rare ship commander who was daring and resourceful enough to make the long and dangerous voyage to the Pacific. At first it was only the English who did this, and privateers Drake and Thomas Cavendish attacked the Spanish in the Pacific during their circumnavigations in the 1570s and 1580s. But by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century a serious threat to the security of Spanish shipping came from the Dutch. The Netherlands were part of a large Spanish empire in Europe, but Spain's efforts to extract more taxes from the Dutch and to force them to return to the Catholic Church

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caused increasing unrest in the Netherlands, and by the early 1570s the Dutch were in full revolt.

In the late 1590s the Dutch began raiding in the Pacific in the hope that attacking the Spanish colonies and ships would force Spain to grant them independence, though early raids were less than successful. Nevertheless, the Dutch had one advantage in their struggle with Spain. The latter was substantially a land power that was obliged to operate at sea to hold on to its overseas possessions, whereas for the Dutch the sea was their natural element. They had a large number of well-built ships manned by well-trained, disciplined crews. These were commanded by talented captains who were usually more competent than their Spanish counterparts.

These privateers were, perhaps, the spiritual inheritors at least of the “sea beggars” (*watergeuzen*), the irregular force of rebels, corsairs, and patriots who preyed on vessels and coastal towns in support of the Dutch revolt against Spain, some of whom were to become Dutch naval heroes. They are most famous for the capture of Brielle in April 1572, a turning point that provided a resurgence for the uprising.

Van Noort set sail from Rotterdam on such a mission in 1598 aboard the *Mauritius*, his 275-ton flagship named for the stadholder, Maurits van Nassau, accompanied by three other ships, *Eendracht*, *Hendrik Frederik*, and *Hoop*. It was to be a voyage filled with adventure and hardship that would mean the loss of three of his ships and most of their crews through storms, disease, clashes with indigenous peoples, and engagements with enemy ships.

By early 1600, after a terrible passage through the Strait of Magellan, he entered the Pacific and proceeded northwards along the coast of Chile and Peru in search of opportunities for pillage. However, the Spanish had received warning of his presence in their waters and Van Noort, not wishing to risk encountering a major Spanish naval

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force, set a westerly course. In due course he made it to the Philippines, a Spanish possession at the time, and entered the archipelago in October 1600. He lay off Manila, plundering inbound trading vessels. One of the ships he fought was Antonio de Morga's galleon *San Diego*, which he engaged and sank in that December after a six-hour battle. (In 1992 French treasure hunters found the wreck of the *San Diego* and recovered more than 34,000 artifacts.) In this way Van Noort set off the broad pelagic struggle between the Dutch and the Spanish for control of the islands of Southeast Asia.

Van Noort eventually returned to Rotterdam by way of the Cape of Good Hope, arriving on August 26, 1601, and quickly published a well-received account of his voyage. It was a financial disaster for the commander and for those who outfitted his fleet; only one of his four ships, *Mauritius*, returned home, and with a much depleted crew. But despite this the explorer was greeted as a hero, first for his accomplishment in being the first Dutchman to circumnavigate the globe, and secondly for having, in the process, taken the war against Spain to the Pacific coast of South America and to Manila Bay, capturing and sinking Spanish ships and disrupting that country's trade. In this way he provided inspiration for his countrymen and for other such expeditions that ultimately helped in the formation of the Dutch East India Company the following year.