



New Netherland Institute  
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

## THE MAN WHO TOOK BACK NEW NETHERLAND

### Cornelis Evertsen the Youngest, 1642-1706

By Peter Douglas



Anyone searching for information about Cornelis Evertsen must be careful; there are three seventeenth century Dutch admirals with this name, and they are all related. Our interest lies in Cornelis Evertsen the Youngest (1642-1706). He was the second son of Admiral Cornelis Evertsen the Elder (1610-66), nephew of Admiral Johan Evertsen (1600-66), and cousin of the latter's son, Admiral Cornelis Evertsen the Younger (1628-79), with whom he is often confused. Cornelis was thus a member of a distinguished dynasty of naval

heroes, though evidently one with little imagination when it came to naming babies. His nickname was *Keesje de Duivel*, or "Little Cornelis the Devil," both for his bravery and for being ever in the thick of a fight, as well as for his hot-tempered and cantankerous nature.

Like a surprising number of Dutch admirals, including De Ruyter, Cornelis was born in Vlissingen, and had already had experience on his father's ship by age ten. When the Second Anglo-Dutch War broke out in 1665 he became a privateer, and it wasn't long

## THE MAN WHO TOOK BACK NEW NETHERLAND Cornelis Evertsen the Youngest, 1642-1706

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before an encounter with three enemy ships led to his capture. Because of his famous father and uncle he received special treatment and came to the attention of the King Charles' brother James, Duke of York, then Lord High Admiral. Samuel Pepys' diary records what happened when James met Cornelis on April 17: "*And Everson, when he was brought before the Duke of Yorke, and was observed to be shot through the hat, answered, that he wished it had gone through his head, rather than been taken.*" Luckily for his country, the ball had only gone through his hat.

Following his release and return to the Netherlands, Cornelis went on to serve with distinction and participated in numerous sea battles. That June he was part of the decisive Dutch victory at Lowestoft, and he fought in the Four Days Battle in 1666, where he was flag captain of his father's ship. Cornelis also took part in the St James Day Battle in 1666, and the following June he had a role in the raid on the Medway. In 1672 Cornelis was in command of one of the men-of-war that repelled the English attack on the Smyrna fleet, a convoy of Dutch armed merchant ships and their escorts, returning from the Levant. The following May he commanded the *Zwanenburg* against the English-French fleet at the Battle of Solebay.

With the war against England still ongoing, the authorities of Zeeland gave this battle-hardened 30-year-old veteran command of a daring and ambitious expedition to capture and plunder England's homeward-bound East India fleet while victualling at St Helena in the South Atlantic. Success would mean the financial salvation of Zeeland. If the mission were to founder, the fleet was to proceed to the Cayenne and the Caribbean to prey on the enemy's ships and destroy and pillage its colonial outposts. No one could know that this voyage would write Cornelis' name in the history books.

The Zeeland Squadron, consisting of six ships, with Cornelis commanding the *Zwanenburg*, left the Netherlands in late 1672. An encounter with a superior English fleet at the Cape Verde Islands forced him to abort the raid after learning that, by an

## THE MAN WHO TOOK BACK NEW NETHERLAND Cornelis Evertsen the Youngest, 1642-1706

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uncanny coincidence, the enemy fleet was also bound for St. Helena to intercept the Dutch VOC fleet. Not wishing to run into the more powerful English fleet again, Cornelis turned to Plan B. His ships reached South America by March 1673, after which he set course headed for the Caribbean. After failing to find prizes in Barbados, he made for Martinique.

Here by chance he encountered the Amsterdam squadron under Jacob Benckes (1637-77), sent out in December to prey on the enemy's colonies and trade in the West Indies. The two squadrons joined to create a formidable naval force, and sailed northwards during the summer months, running up a list of spectacular successes. They captured or destroyed as many as 200 ships, attacked and burned the Virginia tobacco fleet in the Chesapeake, and amassed much booty.

The combined fleet arrived at the English colony of New York in July 1673. The English had taken over New Netherland in 1664, and the sight of the impressive armada with Dutch flags fluttering awoke the smoldering loyalty of many of the inhabitants. While the fleet was lying at anchor off Sandy Hook a contingent of disgruntled Dutchmen went aboard. They grumbled about life under the English, and provided valuable intelligence about the shabby state of the city's defenses and the poorly garrisoned Fort James. They also indicated that Governor Lovelace was absent from the city. All this kindled the interest of Cornelis and Benckes, and gave them a crazy idea: what if they were to actually *retake* New Netherland?

The decision made, Cornelis sent a letter to the citizens of New York, advising them of his intentions and requesting support for such an action, or at least their neutrality. He then demanded that the governor of Fort James should surrender. How Cornelis treated the English authorities gives rich insight into the personality of *Keese de Duivel*. When the Englishmen demanded to see Cornelis' commission he replied that it was "stuck in the muzzle of the cannon," as they would soon find out if they did not hand over the fort.

## **THE MAN WHO TOOK BACK NEW NETHERLAND**

### **Cornelis Evertsen the Youngest, 1642-1706**

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Following a brief exchange of fire and the landing of 600 marines under Captain Anthony Colve, the English surrendered. It was an easy victory. New York became New Orange, Fort James became Fort Willem Hendrick, and Captain Colve was appointed military governor-general. During the transition to a new provisional government, Cornelis and Benckes made a further attack on English interests, this time targeting the Newfoundland fisheries fleet. In October, four ships under Nicholas Boes were sent on this mission and had great success, causing much destruction. After this, Boes was to rendezvous with the Zeeland fleet at Fayal in the Azores.

Cornelis and Benckes left New Orange in mid-September and reached the Azores on October 27, where they encountered a huge storm that caused the loss of several ships. The remnants of the fleet arrived at Cadiz in December, in sore need of repairs and refitting. It was here that Cornelis received orders from home, and he arrived back in Vlissingen on June 23, 1674.

For all the efforts of Cornelis and Benckes, the new Dutch rule at New Orange was short-lived, and in November 1674 the colony reverted to England under the Treaty of Westminster, a bargaining chip in the peace process, and the Dutch empire in the New World finally came to an end.

Cornelis did not get a happy reception. Despite many successes, it was his failures that the Zeeland officials chose to examine. While his companion in arms, Jacob Benckes, was promoted to Vice Admiral of Amsterdam, as his reward Cornelis was accused of disobedience and summoned before the Assembly to answer charges. It didn't help that Cornelis had little to show for his travels, most of his prizes having been lost to storms. His superiors couldn't overlook his failure to carry out his primary mission at St Helena, whose success would have brought huge profits.

## **THE MAN WHO TOOK BACK NEW NETHERLAND**

### **Cornelis Evertsen the Youngest, 1642-1706**

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As for his escapade in New York, this was an impulsive action on Cornelis' part and one not sanctioned in his instructions. While it may be regarded as his greatest achievement of that voyage, this was not how the Zeeland officials saw it. Short of cash, they were looking not for territory but for prize ships and rich cargoes to replenish the depleted provincial treasury. To them this sideshow in New York was minor and incidental; it had created more problems and responsibilities, and, worse, more expense. Cornelis' feat was not so much a grand patriotic thrill, merely a new economic burden.

Nevertheless, Cornelis had a famous name and supporters who were not armchair admirals and knew well the numerous risks and uncertainties of the sea. In the end the charges were dropped, and neither his ambition nor his upward progress was hindered by his failures. He was appointed Rear-Admiral of Zeeland the following year, and in 1677 he commanded a blockade against the Dunkirkers, commerce raiders in the service of Spain operating from Flemish ports. In 1679 he replaced his deceased cousin, Cornelis the Younger, as Vice-Admiral of Zeeland, and he continued to receive promotions and fight battles. He commanded the vanguard of the invasion fleet of William Prince of Orange when he landed in Brixham in November 1688 to begin the "Glorious Revolution," and was involved in an expedition to Ireland. In 1690 at the Battle of Beachy Head Cornelis led the Dutch squadron, this time fighting with the English against the French as Europe continued its political turmoil. Admiral Van Almonde replaced him as commander of the Netherlands fleet in 1690, and he was never to command a major fleet again.

Cornelis died on November 16, his birthday, in 1706 and was buried in St Peter's Church in Middelburg. The tomb was moved to the Nieuwe Kerk in 1918. In 1940 the church was damaged but the tomb survived and can be seen today, "a modest memorial to the man whose raid on America nearly altered the course of history."

**THE MAN WHO TOOK BACK NEW NETHERLAND**  
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