



New Netherland Institute
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

Michiel de Ruyter, Held van Nederland

By Peter Douglas



Michiel de Ruyter

March 24, 2007, is the 400th anniversary of the birth of Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter (1607–1676), perhaps the most renowned admiral in Dutch history. Much of his fame derives from his battles with the English in the Anglo-Dutch Wars, where he scored several major victories. He has been described as not only a military genius but also as a charismatic leader, and an honest, modest, and devout man. He is certainly the man upon whom the fledgling Republic of the United Provinces relied at a crucial time in its history, defending its newly gained independence and assuring its future.

A master tactician, De Ruyter has been described as the man who built the Dutch Navy and made it into a powerful national fighting force. Much of his success comes from improvements in the conditions aboard his ships, an attitude that earned him the loyalty and respect of his fleet. While he insisted on strict obedience, he also encouraged his captains to express their opinions in a council of war before each engagement. He trained his men to outperform other contemporary navies, and raised the status of the Dutch seaman from a loose rabble of mercenaries and pressed semi-criminals to a respected body of men who well deserved the gratitude of their countrymen.

In Ferdinand Bol's 1667 three-quarter portrait below we see De Ruyter in a black coat with gold buttons worn over a long-sleeved brocaded waistcoat. His expression is

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pensive and serious, but his moustache is jaunty. His gold-hilted hanger, presented to him by the Admiral of Amsterdam, is on an elaborate sword belt. Behind a ruffle of lace he wears a steel gorget, below which hangs the French Order of St. Michael. In his oddly delicate and feminine right hand he holds a baton. The man's profession is clearly nautical for he is leaning on a celestial globe, surrounded by navigational charts and dividers. The scene in the background beyond the drapery shows his flagship, the 80-gun *De Zeven Provinciën* (built 1665–66) and other ships of the fleet.

De Ruyter was born in 1607 in Vlissingen, a major port for whalers, privateers, and merchant ships, so a career on the sea seemed most natural if not inevitable for the young Michiel. Little is known about his early life, but it is thought that he became a sailor around the age of eleven as a bosun's apprentice on a merchant ship bound for Brazil. In 1622 he fought against Spain as a musketeer in the Dutch army under Maurice of Nassau during the relief of Bergen-op-Zoom. That same year he rejoined the Dutch merchant fleet and steadily worked his way up. At that time he referred to himself as "Machgyel Adriensoon", his name in the Zeelandic dialect he spoke, not having yet adopted the name "De Ruyter". The origin of the name may be that he took the name of his maternal grandfather, Ruyter, in 1632 or 1633 at age 25 or 26. And then there's the story deriving "De Ruyter" from his cavalryman uncle who had assumed the surname "De Ruyter" ("horseman," "rider"). He may have started using the name to honor this uncle, whom he greatly admired.

In 1631 he married a farmer's daughter named Maayke Velders, but the marriage was not long lived for in that same year Maayke died after giving birth to a daughter, who died three weeks later. From 1633 to 1635 De Ruyter served as first mate in a whaling fleet, and set sail for Jan Mayen Island in the Arctic Ocean. In 1636 he married Neeltje Engels, daughter of a wealthy burgher, who would give him four children. One of these

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died shortly after birth, the others were named Adriaen (1637), Neeltje (1639) and Aelken (1642).

The year 1637 saw De Ruyter as captain of a private ship whose job was to hunt for raiders operating from Dunkirk who preyed on Dutch merchant shipping. After sailing as *schipper* (skipper) of a merchant vessel named the *Vlissinge*, he was contacted again by the Zeeland Admiralty to become captain of the *Haze*, a merchant ship turned man-of-war carrying 26 guns in a fleet under admiral Gijssels fighting the Spanish, teaming up with the Portuguese during their rebellion. The Dutch fleet, with De Ruyter as third in command, beat back a Spanish-Dunkirker fleet in an action of Cape St Vincent on November 4, 1641. After returning he bought his own ship, the *Salamander*, and from 1642 to 1652 he mainly traded and traveled, visiting Morocco and the West Indies, and amassing wealth as a merchant. During this time his esteem grew among Dutch captains from his habit of freeing Christian slaves by redeeming them at his own expense.

In 1650 De Ruyter's wife, who in 1649 had given him a second son, Engel, unexpectedly died while he was at sea, and in 1652 he married again, this time to the widow Anna van Gelder. It was his intention then to retire, and he bought a house in Vlissingen. However, circumstances in the form of the First Anglo–Dutch War dictated that his blissful family life would not last long.

During the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1654), De Ruyter was asked to join the expanding fleet as a sub-commander of a Zeelandic squadron of privately financed warships known as “director's ships.” After initially refusing, stating that he wasn't qualified for such a job, De Ruyter proved his worth under supreme commander Lieutenant-Admiral Maarten Harpertzoon Tromp, winning the Battle of Plymouth against Vice-Admiral George Ayscue. He also fought at the Battle of Kentish Knock and the

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Battle of the Gabbard. De Ruyter functioned as a squadron commander, being referred to as a Commodore, which at the time was not an official rank in the Dutch navy.

Tromp's death during the Battle of Scheveningen in August 1653 ended the war, and De Ruyter declined an emphatic offer from Johan de Witt for supreme command, considering himself "unfit," and also being reluctant to bypass the seniority principle. Colonel Jacob van Wassenaer Obdam then became the new Dutch supreme commander of the confederate fleet. De Ruyter, after wisely refusing to become Obdam's assistant, remained in service of the Dutch navy and later accepted an offer from the admiralty of Amsterdam to become their Vice-Admiral in 1654. He moved with his family to the city the following year.

In July 1655 De Ruyter took command of a squadron of eight ships in his flagship the *Tijdverdrijf*, and set out for the Mediterranean with 55 merchantmen in convoy with orders to protect Dutch trade. After destroying many a privateer, he returned home in May 1656. The same month, the States-General, becoming ever more wary of Swedish king Charles X and his expansion plans, decided to intervene in the Northern Wars by sending a fleet to the Baltic Sea. The Swedes controlled this area after Charles had invaded Poland and made himself king there. De Ruyter once again embarked on the *Tijdverdrijf*, arriving in the Sound the 8th of June, where he awaited Admiral Jacob van Wassenaer Obdam. After Obdam had assumed command, De Ruyter and the Dutch fleet sailed to relieve the besieged city of Gdansk on 27 July, without any bloodshed. Peace was signed a month later. Before leaving the Baltic, De Ruyter and other flag officers were granted audience by Frederick III of Denmark. De Ruyter took a liking to the Danish king who would later become his friend.

In 1664, a year before the Second Anglo–Dutch War officially began, De Ruyter clashed with the English off the West African coast, where both the English and Dutch had significant slave stations, retaking the Dutch possessions occupied by Robert Holmes

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and then crossing the Atlantic to raid the British colonies in America. Arriving off Barbados the end of April 1665 aboard his flagship *Spiegel*, he led his fleet of thirteen vessels into Carlisle Bay, exchanging fire with the English batteries and destroying many of the vessels anchored there. Unable to silence the English guns and having sustained considerable damage to his own vessels, he retired to French Martinique for repairs. Sailing north from Martinique, De Ruyter captured several English vessels and delivered supplies to the Dutch colony at Sint Eustatius. Given the damage he had sustained, he decided against an assault on New York to retake New Netherland. He then took off to Newfoundland, capturing several English fishing boats and temporarily taking St. Johns before proceeding to Europe.

On his return to the Netherlands he learned that Van Wassenaer Obdam had been killed in the disastrous Battle of Lowestoft, June 13, 1665. Many expected that Tromp's son Cornelis would now take command of the confederate fleet, especially Cornelis Tromp himself, who had already been given a temporary commission. Tromp however was not acceptable to the regent regime of Johan de Witt because of his support of the cause of the Prince of Orange. De Ruyter's popularity had grown after his heroic return and he therefore was made commander of the Dutch fleet on 11 August 1665, as Lieutenant Admiral (a rank he shared with four others) of the Amsterdam admiralty.

In this Second Anglo Dutch War (1665–1667) De Ruyter won a hard-fought victory in the Four Days Battle (June 1666) but narrowly escaped disaster in the St James's Day Battle (August 1666), which brought him into conflict with Cornelis Tromp, eventually leading to Tromp's dismissal. He then became seriously ill, recovering just in time to take nominal command of the fleet, executing the raid on the Medway in June 1667, a successful Dutch attack on the largest English naval ships, laid up in the dockyards of Chatham, their main naval base. The Medway raid was a costly and embarrassing

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defeat for the English, resulting in the loss of their flagship HMS Royal Charles, bringing the Dutch close to London, and the war to its end.

Between 1667 and 1671 De Ruyter was forbidden to sail in order not to endanger his life. In 1669 an attempt was made on his life by a Tromp supporter, who tried to stab him with a bread knife in the entrance hall of his house. De Ruyter saved the situation for the Netherlands in the Third Anglo Dutch War. His strategic victories over larger Anglo-French fleets at the battles of Solebay (1672), Schooneveld (1673) and Texel (1673) warded off invasion and countered English naval support to the French. The new rank of Lieutenant-Admiral-General was created especially for him in February 1673, when the new Stadtholder William III of Orange became Admiral-General.

Again taking the battle to the Caribbean, this time against the French, De Ruyter arrived off Martinique aboard his flagship *De Zeven Provinciën* on 19 July 1674. He led a substantial force of eighteen warships, nine provision ships, and fifteen troop transports bearing 3,400 soldiers. Attempting an assault, his fleet was becalmed, allowing the greatly outnumbered French defenders time to solidify their defenses. The next day, newly-placed booms prevented De Ruyter from entering the harbor. Nonetheless, the Dutch soldiers went ashore without the support of the fleet's guns, and were badly mauled in their attempt to reach the French fortifications atop the steep cliffs. His ambitions thwarted and with the element of surprise lost, De Ruyter sailed north to Dominica and Nevis, and then returned to Europe, with disease spreading aboard his ships.

In 1676 De Ruyter took command of a combined Dutch-Spanish fleet to help the Spanish suppress the Messina Revolt and fought a French fleet under Duquesne twice at the Battle of Stromboli and the Battle of Agosta, where, on April 29 he was fatally wounded. His body was returned to the Netherlands where he was given a state

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funeral. He was interred in a mausoleum in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. His successor as supreme commander was Cornelis Tromp.

De Ruyter was honored and respected by all who encountered him, from his sailors and soldiers, who used the term of endearment *Bestevaer* “Grandpa” for him, even to kings. Admiration and esteem extended far beyond the borders of the Republic, so much so that on his last journey home, the late admiral was saluted by cannon shots fired from all French ports and ships by the direct order of King Louis XIV. The inscription on his tomb succinctly says it all: “INTAMINATIS FULGET HONORIBUS” (He shines in untarnished honor).