

Commemoration of Michiel A. de Ruyter, a famous Dutch admiral (1607-1676) at the New Church, Amsterdam



Born in 1607 of humble background Michiel de Ruyter started his life in Flushing as a boisterous, naughty boy. At the age of 11 he first went to sea and made a career as a merchant captain. During this time, Michiel made a lot of money whale hunting, privateering and trading goods from Dublin, eventually retiring a wealthy man well in his 40s. On multiple occasions he had saved his ship, crew and cargo against privateers or warring countries, thereby proven himself a maritime tactical genius. When Adm. Maarten Tromp died in 1653 Raadpensionaris Johan de Witt wanted Michiel de Ruyter as his replacement. Michiel had done some interim work for the navy near the end of the First Anglo Dutch War.

This is when Michiel's added value becomes very clear. As soon as peace settles in, Michiel (maritime knowledge & strategy) and Johan de Witt (political support & money) start a huge shipbuilding program renewing the fleet. Michiel copies and improves on the English invention of "fighting in the line", organizing internal communications using flag signals, preparing actions by scenario planning, taking preachers onboard to boost morale and arranging financial compensation for wounded sailors. For the first time three meals a day became standard, making the navy a popular place to work. No more trolling... It earned him the nickname Bestevaer or "Good Father" with his crew.

In those days the United Provinces (present day Netherlands) was either at war with England or with any other

European country. In the years Michiel was the commanding admiral of the Dutch fleet, he fought and won well over 20 major sea battles, most against the English. The Medway Raid (Tocht naar Chatham) of 1667 was commemorated in England (joined by celebrating Dutch) in 2017 during a ten-day event. It is considered an almost impossible feat to have a fleet of square rigged ships go against tide and wind for over 5 nm up a river, passing a blockade of sunken (English) ships, breaking a chain across the river, sinking 7 major ships and taking two of them home, one the flagship Royal Charles. The latter was towed to Hellevoetsluis, the port of entry for every English Ambassador to our country in the years after this "most glorious defeat" as the English tend to call it since. Although this Raid ended the Second Anglo Dutch War in our favor, with hindsight we could say we did them a favor: after destroying the fleet the political incentive to rebuild was such, that England started Samuel Pepys' 50-ship building program resulting in the biggest and most modern fleet of its age, effectively starting the English Golden Age.

Peace didn't last very long. Europe joined forces against us in 1672. German bishops from Munster and Cologne from the East, the French army from the South and combined English and French navies attacked us at sea. Michiel held them off on four occasions during a two-year period, using the shallow draft of our much smaller ships in order to ground the opposing forces on the sandbanks. Twice... At



the end of August 1673 at Kijkduin (near Den Helder) the enemy come so close to landing its marines the cannonballs can still be found in the dunes and gardens behind.

While he had only four battles at sea, the land battle was more continuous and disastrous. At one point the situation became so desperate a term for it resonates to the present day: 'Het volk was redeloos, de regering radeloos en het land reddeloos'. The people were irrational, the government distraught and the country beyond salvation. To save at least Holland and the capital Amsterdam the Dutch Waterline was activated: dikes were broken, water poured into the polders, submerging farmland and villages. It effectively became Michiel's territory and he used his sailors and marines to man flat bottom or lighter ships armed with a single canon. It took to the autumn of 1673 for our country to free itself of the foreign threat to our sovereignty and even longer for a peace treaty to be signed. In the end we survived. In two years, we will commemorate and celebrate the "Disaster Year 1672" (Rampjaar 1672) throughout the country during many symposia, exhibitions, re-enactments and local events around this theme. You will definitely hear more from us by then.

For Michiel the battles didn't end there. Tension with the French eventually got the Republic tangled in a dispute for the island of Sicily. Spanish territory through the Viceroy of Naples, the French had set their eyes on it. Michiel was sent to the Mediterranean with a much to small fleet to help the Spanish fleet, also very small but at least with some galleys for tactical advantage. But... galleys have slaves to do the rowing. In this case Catholic Spain had taken 40 Hungarian preachers onboard as galley slaves. By the time Michiel joined the fleet in Naples only 28 were still alive. As a devout Protestant himself and backed by the States General he did his utmost to free these men. We're not sure if he used diplomacy or had to threaten the Viceroy with his guns, but he succeeded in setting the men free.

To this day the Hungarian Protestants commemorate this in every town or village of Reformed religion. In the Netherlands the heritage foundation Michiel de Ruyter together with the Hungarian Embassy commemorate this yearly at the New Church, Amsterdam. Saturday February 15th, 2020, 16.30-19.00 will be the next occasion. The event will consist of some lectures, a wreath laying ceremony and a visit inside the crypt. The latter is unique, but has been a tradition for centuries as de Ruyter's grave became a place of pilgrimage shortly after his death. Contact the foundation for details on how to subscribe to this event.

Ir. Frits de Ruyter de Wildt
Chairman Foundation M de Ruyter
Descendant & lecturer

www.deruyter.org
stichting@deruyter.org

