

BY A NOT SO OLD HYDROGRAPHER

As it Was

"Land in sight", a cry soon to be followed by "Clew up the main", to reduce speed. It is 1606 as the Dutch ship *Duyfken* makes first recorded landfall in Australia. But this is not simply landfall: *Duyfken*, under the command of Willem Janszoon, charts the first 200NM of the Great Southland: Australia. During this exploration of the East Coast of the Cape York Peninsula contact was also made with local Aboriginal people.

The Dutch, as sixteenth-century European traders and carriers of goods such as grain and herring from the Baltic and salt and spices from the Iberian peninsula, fought a long and cruel war of independence against Spain from 1568-1648. When Philip II, also King of Portugal, closed the port of Lisbon, centre for eastern trade, to Dutch ships in the late sixteenth century, the Dutch started seeking their own routes to Asia for tea, porcelain and cotton, especially to the Spice Islands, the Moluccan Islands in present-day Indonesia, for the lucrative spice trade. Initial expeditions by Willem Barentszoon sought a route via the north-east but became stranded in ice, after which the Dutch turned to the south-east.

With the first expedition (in Dutch 'Eerste Schipvaart') around Africa lead by Cornelius Houtman in 1595, the Dutch proved themselves able to navigate to and within Asia. In order to bundle the follow-on activities of several competing Dutch spice-trading companies and to provide united opposition to Portuguese and Spanish competitors came the founding in 1602 of the United Dutch East Indies Company, in Dutch abbreviated to VOC. Merchants from the different Dutch towns now had to work together.

Duyfken to the Indies

The *Duyfken*, or *Little Dove*, made her first trip to Asia in a fleet of almost twenty ships in 1601. She was a tiny ship of barely 20 metres, but fast and lightly armed and probably intended for small and valuable cargoes. Her complement was probably only twenty men. Her capacity was about 50 tonnes: very small compared to the bigger ships capable of carrying fifteen times that load. In December 1601 the *Duyfken* participated in an important battle against the Portuguese near Bantam (Batavia/Djakarta-Indonesia). The Dutch won this battle, bringing to an end the undisputed dominance of the Portuguese and Spanish in the European spice trade.

The *Duyfken* returned to The Netherlands in early 1603, to depart again in December of the same year, returning exactly a year later. To illustrate her relative speed, on the voyage home from the Indies in 1602 the *Duyfken* became separated from the larger ships in a storm near southern Africa, yet reached The Netherlands two months ahead of the larger ships. After returning to Banda, the Spice Islands, the *Duyfken* operated within Asia carrying both cargo and passengers. She also took part in a number of sea battles, this despite being named for a symbol of peace!

Duyfken to the Southland

In 1605 Willem Janszoon as skipper and Jan Lodewijkszoon van Rosengeyn as chief merchant (supercargo) were tasked with discovering "the great land of New Guinea (Nova Guinea) and other East and Southlands". The log for the expedition is lost, but thanks to other sources such as contemporary accounts, references and a copy of the drawn-up chart, the experience of crew and the sailed track are known. In November 1605, the *Duyfken* set sail to the Kei Islands, then along the south coast of New Guinea, looking for places of commercial interest until she was diverted to the south by the shoals of Torres Strait, near Cape False. Janszoon continued south-south-east until he met land again: the West Coast of the Cape York Peninsula. He charted a good 200NM down this coast to Cape Keerweer, making his first landfall at a river which he charted as "R. met het Bosch" (River with Forest), now known as Penne-father River.

Willem Janszoon thought he still saw the coast of New Guinea. Finding another river, which he called the River Batavia, now known as the River Wenlock, he explored it by small boat and landed at Port Musgrave. The first contact with the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia ended in a far from friendly manner as the crew of the boat came under attack: the first fateful recorded contact between Aboriginals and Europeans. One member of the crew died by spear and, because during earlier landings along the coast of New Guinea eight other members had already lost their lives, the ships' complement was now almost halved.

The loss of so many men, in addition to a shortage of drinking water and provisions, led Willem Janszoon to abandon his explorations. The farthestmost point reached by the *Duyfken* at this time was named 'Keer Weer', a Dutch term that translated means 'Turn Again' and may

also be interpreted as 'return again', evidently Janszoon's intention. Cape Keerweer is still to be found on present-day charts. The ship finally returned safely to Banda in June 1606.<

As experienced by the Aboriginals

Descendants of the Dutch sailors and Aboriginal inhabitants concerned relate this encounter in varying versions. The main theme of the story is that first contacts seemed friendly. The Dutch wanted to dig wells for fresh water, which was initially accepted, although the smoke coming out of their mouths (!) was interpreted as a token of evil. A dispute concerning a wife, possibly taken as proof of expedition findings, resulted in the conflict that caused casualties on both sides.

Further

Finding no good trading possibilities or other valuable exploitable goods such as spices or minerals, the expedition was deemed less than encouraging for the VOC, although curiosity was raised, especially as to the reportedly 'opening' (Torres Strait). But because the Dutch needed their ships in their battles with competitors, a new expedition was delayed. However, the Willem Janszoon expedition provided the impetus for further excursions, and within fifty years the Dutch, including Abel Tasman, had explored the entire North and West Coasts, and a good deal of the South Coast. In 1623 the route discovered by Janszoon was again voyaged by Jan Carstenszoon, who named the eastern coast of the Cape York Peninsula 'Carpentier' after the then VOC Governor-General.

Later in his life, Willem Janszoon landed on Australia's West Coast, thereby becoming the first European to visit the continent twice. But he would not have supposed this landing place belonged to the same continent as the coast he navigated in 1606. In a letter to the directors of the VOC he writes: "[â€] 31st of July (1618) discovered an island and landed, found footsteps of menâ€™. Little is known about the private life of Willem Janszoon. He was a cadet officer in 1586. He was not only skipper and explorer/hydrographer, but also fought and won sea battles. He served as Governor of Banda from 1623 to 1627, rose to the rank of Admiral and retired in 1629. He once was described as "mild, modest and unassuming" and a commander who "never had the slightest trouble with his crew, and always maintained order on his ship".

And what happened to the *Duyfken*? In 1607 she may have made a second voyage east to Australia. In 1608 the *Duyfken* was reported 'burst on the doublings' and judged irreparable, having been taken within the reef on the Moluccan island of Ternates for bottom repairs. She had been involved in a battle with three Spanish galleons. In those days, ships had double planking to try to protect them from borer mussels.

A fine replica of the *Duyfken* was built in Australia, and she took part in the four hundred-year anniversary of the VOC in The Netherlands in 2002, at which celebrations she attracted many admiring visitors and much comment (for further information see www.duyfken.com).

On their way "to Australia" Willem Janszoon noted an "opening" near present-day Strait Torres but, forced by shallows, he proceeded southwards until he met the North Coast of Australia, thinking this to be part of New Guinea. Several months later (October), the Spanish captain Luiz Vaez de Torres managed to find the sea strait from the east, and probably sighted Cape York. He too failed to recognise it as a continent, but his report was condemned to oblivion until in 1762 Alexander Dalrymple, the first British hydrographer, found a copy in Manila. The strait was subsequently given the name of Torres Strait.

We should have great admiration for the skills, daring and perseverance of the marine explorers of that time. They sailed in ships without any comfort, with poor food, and enjoyed hardly any foresight as to when they would be able to restock and store provisions again. Compared to present-day sailing technology, these men had poor sailing capabilities, limited knowledge of weather systems and no weather forecasts. They had not the slightest idea when to expect land or dangerous shoals, or when they did sight these, hopefully in daylight and in time, it was a matter of providence whether they appeared on your 'safe side', i.e. windward, so you could manoeuvre by sail free of them. And as those ships could not sail very much to windward, the chance was fairly limited that you would see those dangers on your windward (safe) side. No way of approaching a potential danger with your engine on 'dead slow'. Bearing all this in mind, it becomes easier to comprehend decisions taken at the time: e.g. it might very well be that Willem Janszoon discovered the shoals north-west of Cape York in unfavourable wind conditions and so did not try to bypass them and thus find the Torres Strait.

Despite all this, Willem Janszoon and Jan Lodewijkszoon van Rosengeyn were the first European 'discoverers' of the Australian continent, although they did not know at the time that what they had found was a new continent. But then neither did Columbus when he landed in America, thinking he was in Asia.

References

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- VOC Historical Society Inc., Why was the VOC founded: <http://www.voc.iinet.net.au/vocpg3.htm>
- J.E. Heeres, The Part Borne by the Dutch in the Discovery of Australia 1606-1765, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks05/0501231e/008.html>

- Australia on the Map, Captain Who: <http://www.australiaonthemap.org.au/mediakit.html>
- South Land to New Holland: Dutch Charting of Australia 1606–1756 <http://www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/>

Authors Notes

Those with plenty of time may like to find www.white-sails.com.au for instructions on how to build a model of the *Duyfken*. Or are the days of daylight surveying only a thing of the past?

The 'z' at the end of many Dutch names of that time denotes 'zoon' or 'son'. Willem Jansz. thus signifies Willem the son of Jan (William, son of John).

Some translations of antique Dutch words may help the reader to better understand the original chart: Heenvaart = Outward bound; Weeromkeer = Back again; Vuijle Bancken = Dangerous Banks; 't Hooghe Eijland = The High Island; R. Vis = River Fish; Dubbelde Rhee = Double Roads; Vliege Baij = Bay of Flies.

Explore the coastal region with Google Earth as if you were Willem Janszoon.

<https://www.hydro-international.com/content/article/as-it-was-45>
