

A Spanish-Dutch Military Confrontation. The Battle of Nieuwpoort, July 2nd 1600

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A complex politico-military situation had arisen in the Low Countries as a result of the opposition against Spanish rule during the last quarter of the 16th century.

Warfare had been more or less continuous for over 25 years. As a result of the revolution, the Northern Netherlands had established an independent republic with its own entirely new army.

The Republic of the United Netherlands, as it became known, had a federal structure with, in wartime, a unified command of the army. Since the powerbase of the Republic rested in its merchant cities and the economy of the Republic was booming notwithstanding the war, a solid financial basis for military expenditure was present.

The conflict between the Netherlands and Spain had developed from local revolutionary outbursts to sustained warfare, whereby the Spanish monarchy tried to re-establish its authority by gaining control of the territory, particularly the cities and the coastal areas, which were essential for the supply of the Spanish expeditionary force with necessities from Spain.

Around 1600, the Dutch army under the command of Count (later Prince) Maurits of Nassau had largely succeeded in safeguarding the commercial cities of the Republic from Spanish interference. The target of the Dutch army now became the control of the Flemish coast to prevent free movement of troops and supplies between Spain and Flanders by ship. The political decision was taken in Holland to assault Dunkirk, thus denying

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the Spaniards control of the Flemish coast. The military plan for this operation involved the concentration in complete secrecy of an amphibious force of about 15,000 men in the South of Holland at Dordrecht to make a simultaneous assault by a quick moving force along the coast and an amphibious assault from the sea directed at the fortified towns along the coast of Flanders. The success of the entire plan was dependent on the adherence to a very strict timetable.

The political decisionmakers and to a lesser extent the military commanders were convinced that the military machine at their disposal would be equal to this challenge. The reason for this confidence can be found in the fact that the army of the Dutch Republic had been created in the last decennium of the 16th century, with the purpose of forming a modern striking force for use in the field. Thus far, this army had largely been involved in siege warfare during the summer seasons. To achieve tactical surprise in this type of warfare, a transport system had been developed, making use of the extensive network of waterways in the Netherlands.

Another important asset of the Dutch Republic lay in the emergence of an armament manufacturing capability which by the end of the century distributed all kinds of armaments, from artillery to infantry equipment, all over the western world, gaining large profits in the process.

The schooling of the army in handling of weapons and tactical manoeuvring in the field in accordance with newly developed military doctrines had been subject of special care by the Commander-in-Chief Count Maurits. A thorough study of classical Roman and Greek military authors had led to the formulation of a specific doctrine encompassing most aspects of military activity. This doctrine had been laid down in a considerable body of military manuals and literature. The most famous of these books is perhaps Jacob de Gheyn, *The Exercise of Arms*, published in The Hague in 1608. An important aspect of these innovations was the introduction of drill in the daily routine of the troops.

As the two most significant advantages enjoyed by the army of the Dutch Republic over the Spanish army of Flanders we might thus define: The economic base to furnish the army with modern armament, regular supply and regular pay on one hand, and the introduction of a standardized system of exercise and command based on established doctrine.

With hindsight, it is now possible to detect the inherent weaknesses of the Spanish army in Flanders. The Spanish army was on this moment in time at the zenith of its reputation, its officers and soldiers recruited in many of the territories under Spanish control represented the top of military professionalism. The Spanish and Italian noblemen who led this army had been educated as officers and gentlemen and the troops had experience of battlefields all over Europe and were motivated by religious fervour in a conflict with heretic rebels. However, the weak financial management of

the Spanish monarchy created a climate of permanent bankruptcy which endangered the supply and pay of the army. This led to a series of mutinies which seemed to paralyse the army. The great distance between the Government in Spain and the theatre of operations in the Netherlands constituted another drawback. Whereas the Government of the Dutch Republic was represented by deputies in the field who were empowered to take far reaching decisions, the Spanish commander in the Netherlands, Archduke Albertus, had only a general brief from the Spanish King and had to depend on his own judgement in a crisis.

Finally, the powerful Spanish fleet was only occasionally available for action on the Flemish coast, while the Dutch Republic was able to station a considerable naval force off the Flemish coast permanently.

Condition for success of the Dutch plan of operations was the capture of Dunkirk between 18 and 20 days after the start of the assault, provided that complete secrecy was maintained until day one of the operation. Overriding scepticism from the military commanders, the political authorities decided that mutinies in the Spanish army and poor communications in the frontier areas would create the necessary surprise.

In fact, the effectiveness of Spanish intelligence proved better and the effectiveness of Dutch transport arrangements proved worse than estimated, endangering the operation, which started in the early hours of June 18th, from the beginning. More than 1200 mostly small ships landed a force of 13.000 infantry, 2700 cavalry and a siege train on the Flemish coast near Philippine, a small fortress town already held by the Dutch.

Covered by the fleet the army moved southward along the coast, underestimating the threat of the Spanish army in its back. On July 1st, already a week behind its schedule, the Dutch army was overtaken by a Spanish force commanded by Archduke Albertus and Francisco Hurtado de Mendoza, just as it was crossing the river Yser near the town of Nieuwpoort. A large rearguard detachment was annihilated by the Spanish army but the main body of the Dutch army succeeded in recrossing the river and turning back on its tracks just in time to meet the Spanish army.

This was the first occasion on which the Spanish and Dutch armies met in the open field. Until this moment the war had been a succession of small skirmishes, guerilla warfare and sieges. Now for the first time the Dutch commander had to risk the entire military might of the Republic in a single battle. Although to a certain extent this was the challenge he had been preparing his army for, his attitude leaned more to Fabius Cunctator than to Caesar or Scipio.

To stiffen morale of the troops, the Dutch commanders decided to send the fleet off to sea so as to effectively burn their bridges. The order of battle chosen might have come straight from a Roman example. Compared with the Spanish order of battle, Maurits arranged his army in much smaller units which had been trained in articulated movements. A small number of

cannon could be moved onto the beach on which the battle would be fought. The beach was very wide at low tide and would get much narrower with the rising of the tide. The centre of the Dutch formation which would have to withstand the onslaught of the Spanish Tercios was composed of English volunteers, the most trusted infantry in the Dutch army. They were commanded by Sir Francis Vere. Other non-Dutch units in the army consisted of German, Scottish, Walloon and Swiss troops. The composition of the Spanish army was equally cosmopolitan: Spanish, Italian, Walloon, German, Irish and Burgundian.

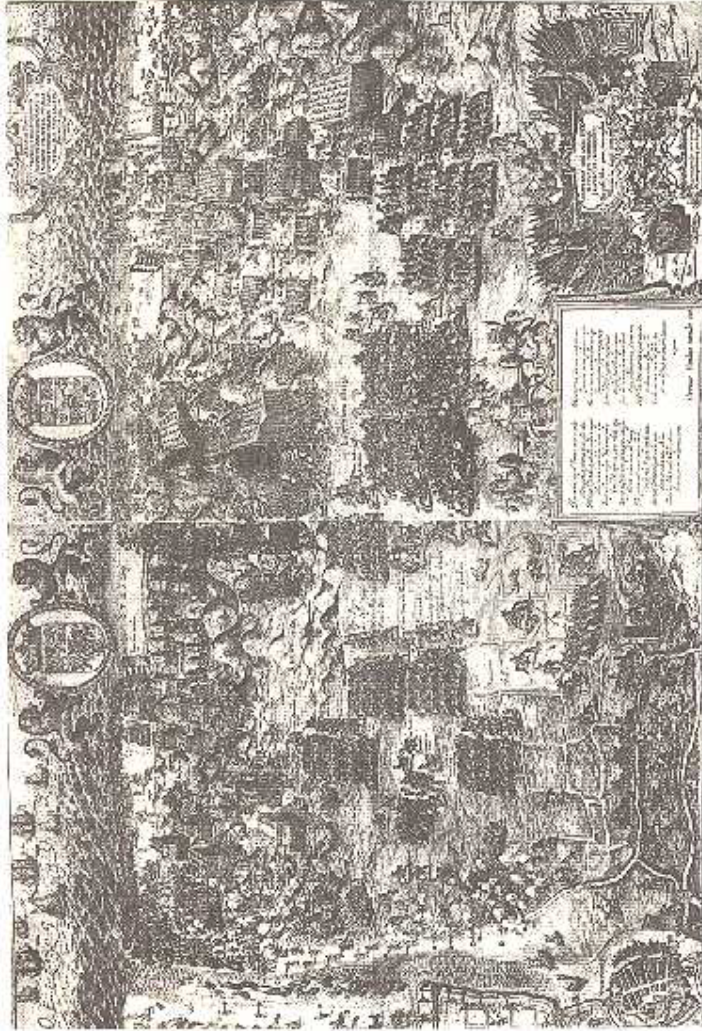
Religious fervour was not the monopoly of the Spanish army. The army of the Dutch Republic was emphatically protestant. The motivation of many of the foreign volunteers was to fight Roman Catholicism. Just before the fighting began, the chaplain of Count Maurits of Nassau was asked to pray in front of the troops for victory. This chaplain was Johannes Uytenbogaert (1557-1644), in later life the subject of a famous painting by Rembrandt, now in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

The battle was decided by the advantage of the better articulation of the more modern Dutch army, a reserve of cavalry kept hidden behind the dunes until the final moment, and the presence of artillery in the Dutch army which had been better placed and which disposed of canister shot. At the end of the day, the Spanish army broke and was largely overrun, dispersed, killed or captured. The Archduke could escape, only his horse was captured and brought triumphantly to Holland, where it figured in a painting by Jacob de Gheyn.

Francisco Hurtado de Mendoza was captured and had dinner on the battlefield with Count Maurits on the same evening. He was then taken to The Hague as a state prisoner and treated with great distinction until his exchange against all Dutch prisoners in Spanish hands in 1602. In the meantime he figured at all important state occasions in The Hague as an honoured guest and a marvel for all to see.

The battle of Nieuwpoort, tactical victory as it was, proved to be a strategic defeat. The plans to capture the Flemish coast had to be abandoned. No Dutch commander would ever thereafter risk the existence of the Republic in a single land battle. This privilege now fell to the admirals of the Dutch fleet. The result of the battle was, after many years of stalemate, an armistice which interrupted the 80 years of conflict between Holland and Spain for 12 years.

Finally, the date 1600 - Battle of Nieuwpoort remains firmly engraved in the Dutch national conscience for reasons nobody fully understands at the present day.

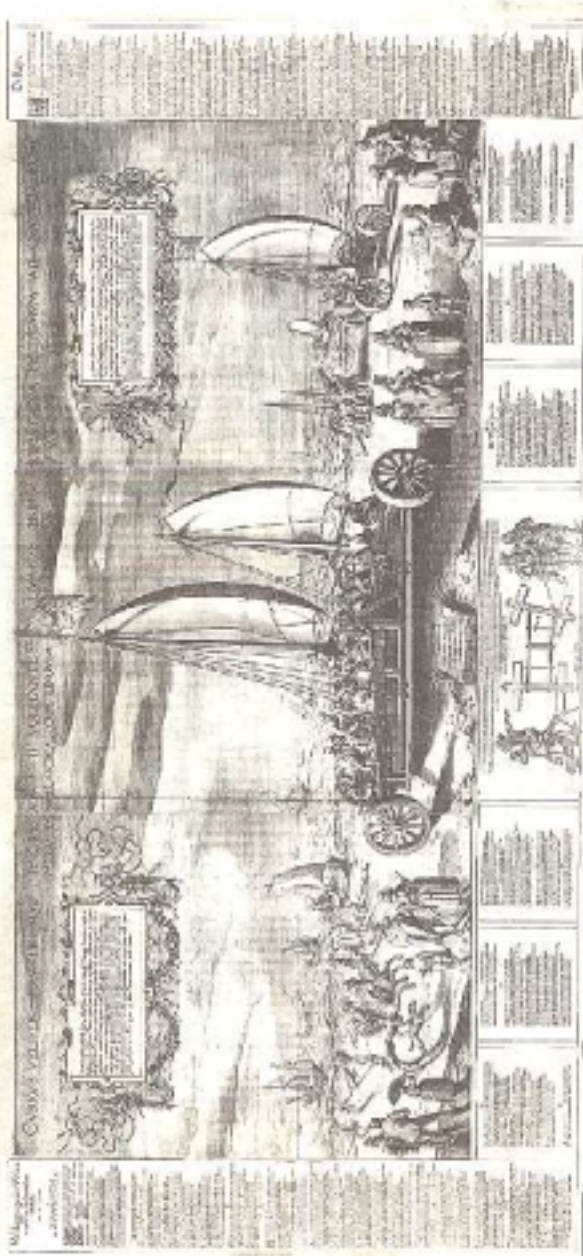


Battle of Nieuwpoort 2 July 1600. Engraving by Balthasar Floris van Berckenrode (1616). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

This engraving shows the beginning of the battle.

On the left side the army of the Dutch Republic is shown. In the upper left hand corner the transport of the army is assembled on the beach. Some ships of the Dutch fleet are seen at sea.

On the right side the order of battle of the Spanish army is shown. The basic tactical units are much bigger than the Dutch ones. In the lower right hand corner a trophy of captured flags is shown, totalling 105. In the centre of the trophy the captured white horse of Archduke Albertus is shown.



Sailing car on the beach at Scheveningen, autumn 1600. Engraving by W. van Swanenburgh and C. van Sicheem after a drawing by Jacob de Gheyn (1612). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
 The engraving shows two sailing cars on the beach near The Hague. An international party, among whom Francisco Hurtado de Mendoza, then a state prisoner in The Hague, takes part in the event.