

INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE SIGNAL-FLAGS IN
THE NETHERLANDS NAVY -----

It is a pleasure for me having got the opportunity to speak on the signal-flags used by the navy of the Netherlands.

I should say: the navies (in plural), for we have had several due to the different forms of government which our country has known.

It is a point of discussion as to when we can start to speak about the navy of the Netherlands. The late Captain J.C.M. Warnsinck of the Royal Netherlands Navy, who in 1933 became a lecturer at the University of Amsterdam, said in his speech at the start of his lectureship that he regarded Philip, Duke of Burgundy, as the father of the Netherlands navy. His edict of the 16th of May 1438, whereby he ordered the fitting-out of a large fleet, shortly after the outbreak of a naval war between Holland and Zealand on one side, and the Wendish cities of the Hanseatic League on the other, could be readily considered as the birth certificate of the Holland-Zealand navy, built up and fitted out with consent of the inhabitants of the country. 1)

If we accept this theory, then we can agree with Mr. W. Voorbeijtel Cannenburg, retired Commander Royal Netherlands Navy, who stated 2) that the signal-letter (a translation of the Dutch word "sein-brief"; the British speak about "fighting instructions", which in fact they are, containing some signals) which originated with the Admiral Hendrik van Borssele, who died in 1474, is the oldest known arrangement for signalling at sea for our navy. 3)

By day signals were made by posting banners in different positions on board of the ships.

We can say that the need for signalling at sea arose when more than one ship sailed together and communications became necessary for combined actions.

A signal-letter of the 2nd of July 1558 proves that flags and pennants were used in the fleet of Vice Admiral Adolf of Burgundy. 4)

The use of flags however was still limited. The ships were slow and it was possible to give most of

the instructions during councils of war held at sea on board of the flag-ship. However the participants were called on board by a special signal(-flag). This procedure was still in use in the fleets of the Republic of the United Seven Provinces, which fleets were composed of ships of five different administrations: the boards of the Admiralties of the (river) Maas (Rotterdam), Amsterdam, Northern-Quarter (West-Friesland), Zeeland and Friesland.

By the way, nowadays we can compare the situation in those days with the NATO-fleets, composed of ships of different national administrations, but operating under a single commander.

Those Admiralty Boards were founded in 1596 (and lasted till 1795) and if we compare an order of 23rd April 1599 for the fleet under Admiral Pieter van der Does 5) with the known previous signal-letters we discover already a certain progress.

For the first time the flags are further specified. Beside the use of flags and pennants, signals were made with the sails (hoisting or lowering, fastening or loosening).

The number of ships sailing and fighting in fleets became bigger and bigger in the 17th century and so the need for a more extensive signal system increased. In the battle of the Downs in 1639 Lieutenant - Admiral M.H.Tromp had already at his disposal red, white and blue signal flags and in the signal-letter of Lieutenant-Admiral-General M.A.de Ruyter of 1673 6) more flags and pennants are mentioned. In combination with other means of signalling that signal-letter comprised 44 signals against that of Van Borssele 11 (quotation from 2)).

The meaning of the signal-flags, fixed by special instruction for the duration of the voyage, changed with the position in which they were shown and with the combination of other means, in fact sails and gunshots.

In 1691 the British Admiral Edward Russell issued his Fighting Instructions 7), which booklet gives the signals to be used, and they are similar to those ordered by Vice-Admiral Philips van Almonde

for the Netherlands ships under his command in the combined fleet of those days. A handmade copy can be seen in the Rotterdam Museum "Atlas van Stolck"8). Mr. Voorbeijtel Cannenburg in his already mentioned article draws attention to the close resemblance of the two signal-books, but he overlooked something written underneath article 29 of the Dutch manuscript, which says: "Actum in 's lands schip d'unie, sailing Ushant S.E. $\frac{1}{2}$ south about 10 miles away from us, the 25th May 1691" and signed P.van Almonde. Vice-Admiral Van Almonde was the second in command in the fleet of Admiral Russell.

As the contents of this signal-book, although handmade, are in general the same as those of a printed signal-book of 1746 9), we can say that we have found the oldest signal-book of the Netherlands navy. I dare say this all the more as the oldest known British one is that of Admiral Russell.

In the Public Library of New York is an original signal-letter with a text of the 7th November 1659. The secret signals and the (identification) words are inscribed the 29th December 1690. So this signal letter (book) was in use for 30 years. It fits in with my statement about the book of 1691.

The foreword of the booklet of 1746 specifies that it is not only to be used in the combined fleets (British and Netherlands) but also by the Netherlands ships when they operate together in the service of the Republic.

The book has also a few pages with drawings of ships not showing flags, but which were to be used for inserting flags for additional signals. As in 1756 a new much more extensive and large signal-book was issued to the ships of our navy, we can state for certain that over a period of at least 65 years a combined signal-book amongst two allies was in use. How much we missed such a book during the battle of the Java Sea in 1942 !

I was very lucky to be able to make a fotocopy of a handmade signal-book of a certain Captain Bomblod of 1747. It was made by a yet unknown captain, but the additional signals give a clue that he was serving

in a squadron of four ships under Vice-Admiral Cornelis Schrijver, most likely as his flag-captain. As the meaning of the different flags at their different positions is the same as that of the above mentioned booklet of the previous year it proves that indeed this combined signal-book was used also in the Netherlands ships during national operations.

In the Nederlandsch Historisch Scheepvaart Museum in Amsterdam there are more of these handmade signal-books, different in design depending on the opinion of the maker as to their most handy use.

From the pictures in the above mentioned books we learn the shape and colours of the flags. But the booklet of Captain Bomblet also gives the name by which the 20 flags in use were known. (SEE APPENDIX) About 1756 a new signal-book, proposed by Rear-Admiral Count van Bylandt, came into force in the Netherlands navy. There is still one copy known 10), but as this one was never used the colours of the 12 signal-flags and five pennants to be hoisted in a specified position to convey an order. The number of positions was reduced to four, the three mastheads and the top of the mizzen-yard.

For security reasons the number of the flag was not fixed, but could be changed on each voyage. From a painting we learn that it was customary in 1757 to dress the ship with flags on special occasions, among others the birthday of H.M. the Prince of Orange, as we do now on the Queens birthday. A painting depicts the Netherlands ship of the line Prinses Carolina, commanded by the Rear-Admiral W. Baron van Wassenaer, in the roadstead of Malaga on the 8th of March 1757, showing all the flags in use.

By this we get an idea of the colours of the signal-flags, which differ little from those in use in 1747. The position where the flags were shown indicated their meaning. Difficulties arose when that position could not be used for hoisting a flag as for example when a mast was shot away.

So in 1781 a new signal-book 11) was printed according to the principles laid down by Captain Knight Jan Hendrik van Kinsbergen. Now a signal kept its

meaning regardless of the position where it was hoisted, which should be there, where it could be seen best.

This principle has remained since; the use of the 10 flags lasted with minor changes till 1901. Besides flags there were 10 pennants of about the same colours and 10 so called "spreekwimpels", talking-pennants to indicate the ships (captains) with whom one wished to communicate.

Although these talking-pennants were shown for the first time in this signal-book, by reading the book of 1756 one gets the impression that the principle had already been accepted earlier.

A manuscript logbook of a Lieutenant Bouman, who served in the squadron of Commodore Van Braam during the voyage to the East Indies in 1783, contains coloured illustrations of the signal-flags used.

For the five ships there are five talking pennants, the colouring of some is slightly different to those of the book of 1781. This concurs with what is written in the book of 1756 that additional flags can be made and used.

The colours of the signal-flags shown in the log-book also show some deviation of the known flags. The size of these signal-books was so big, that for use at sea officers still made their own handy booklets, handwritten and coloured.

The naval library has such a book 12). It is not dated, but the flags are the same as in 1781, though the pennants are like those of 1791. This gives us the impression that during that period changes had already been made.

For the use in convoys a special signal-book was printed. We have a copy of such a book edited in 1794 13).

In 1819 the Minister for the Navy ordered an additional signal-book, the so called Telegraphic Signal-book with 10 flags, a distinction flag and one blue broad pennant. 14)

The flags nr 2 and nr 8 were slightly altered to avoid confusion and a special system for hoisting the flags was introduced. It came into use on the 1st

January 1820.

The so called General Signal-Book was reprinted several times, but it was not until 1855 that this signal-book was replaced 15). Apparently for better distinction at larger distances some flags were altered again.

But since then the technical revolution in the navy called for so many alterations, that new books were issued in 1875 16) and 1890 17). Fighting distances became greater, as did the speed of ships. To hold councils of war on board of flag-ships before battle was no longer possible. The old telescope was replaced by binoculars, and thus the reading of signals were made easier at longer distances. For very long distances signals were made with a combination of black balls, cones and cylinders.

In 1901 the Netherlands warships got a set of 27 signal flags. It is very sad that no copy is left of the signal-book of 1901 nor of those of later years. But the flags, each representing a letter, are known. Eight of them were the same as the previous ones. They are shown in a small signal-book specially made for the use in the ship's boats 18).

In the meantime the International Signal-Book came into force with its own set of flags. The colours of the flags became more complicated.

In 1914 the Netherlands navy did away with her own flags and they were substituted by those of the international code. There was a change internationally in 1929 and the navy followed suit.

Since 1957 the Netherlands navy has again special naval signal-flags and pennants corresponding with those of her allies, but the use of flags is more and more reduced since the introduction of arm-signalling (abolished in 1965), signal-lamps, wireless signalling and lately of voice-radio.

So we can say that though the signal-flags are still existing their use is limited mostly to indicate certain situations or for recognition purposes.

Their fading away and perhaps some day their disappearance will be felt as a loss. Their gay fluttering always brightened the grim look of the ships of

the "sea-police", as our navy was so appropriately named in the 17th century.

The knowledge however of the signal-flags is of great significance for the historian. Old and new pictures, if well painted, tell more about their meaning if one can read the signals. And so do the command-flags and pennants which in a certain way should be regarded as signal-flags as they communicate the positions of the flag-officers or flag-men, as they were called in old books.

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Notes

- 1) De Geschiedenis van ons Zeewezen. Rede uitgesproken bij de opening zijner lessen in de Geschiedenis van het Zeewezen, op den 30sten Mei 1933, door J.C.M. Warnsinck, Kapitein ter Zee b.d., Privaat-Dozent aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam. ('s-Gravenhage, 1933).
- 2) Het seinwezen bij 's Lands Zeemacht, door W. Voorbeijtel Cannenburg. (Marineblad 52e jrg 1937, p.611).
- 3) This signal-letter (Sein-brief) in the archives of Veere, is printed as Annex V of Vol. I of the Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsch Zeewezen, door Jhr. Mr. J.C. de Jonge (Haarlem, 1858).
- 4) This signal-letter is printed as Annex VI of 3).
- 5) To be found in the Instructieboek van de Staten-Generaal (Algemeen Rijksarchief, 's-Gravenhage).
- 6) Printed in Admiraal de Ruyter. De zeeslag op Schooneveld, door J.C.M. Warnsinck ('s-Gravenhage, 1930).
- 7) Printed in J.S. Corbett, Fighting Instructions 1530-1816. (Publications of the Navy Records Society, Vol. XXIX).
- 8) Catalogue of the Atlas van Stolck, nr 2953.
- 9) Afbeelding van alle de Generale Zeinen die gedaan en geobserveerd werden in 's Lands Vloot, door H. Govertsz (Amsterdam, 1746).
- 10) Generale Zeinen voor een Vloot of Esquader oorlogsschepen. (Amsterdam, plm 1756). (Copy n: 5 in the Library of the Navy; 's-Gravenhage. Cat. number 3B1).
- 11) Generale Zeinen voor een Vloot of Esquader oor-

- log-schepen. (Amsterdam, 1781). (Library of the Navy Cat.number 3B3).
- Reprinted 1808. (Library of the Navy Cat.number 3B4).
- 12) (Library of the Navy Cat.number B75).
- 13) Zeinen omme achtervolgt te worden bij de Hoofd-Officiëren en Capiteinen van Haar Ed.Mog.Ressorte, Geordonneert tot het doen der Convoijen van Koopvaardij-schepen. (Rotterdam, 1794). (Libr.of the Navy Nr 2B1).
- 14) Telegraphisch Seinboek ten dienste van 's Rijks Schepen en vaartuigen van oorlog. ('s-Gravenhage, 1819) (Library of the Navy Cat.number 2B8).
- 15) Dag-seinboek voor de Nederlandsche Zeemacht ('s-Gravenhage, 1855). (Library of the Navy Cat.number 3B10)
- 16) Seinboek voor de Koninklijke Nederlandsche Zeemacht. ('s-Gravenhage, 1875). (Library of the Navy, Cat.number 3B12).
- 17) Seinboek voor de Koninklijke Nederlandsche Zeemacht. ('s-Gravenhage, 1890). (Library of the Navy, Cat.number B60).
- 18) Sloepseinboekje, 1904. (Library of the Navy, B64).
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APPENDIX

Thanks to the handmade signal-book of Captain Bomble we know how the different signal-flags were named in his days (1747). Since 1756 the flags were known by numbers, although these were not permanent.

1639

Fighting Instructions of Lieutenant-Admiral M.H.Tromp For the first time red, white and blue flags were mentioned.

1673

Fighting Instructions of Lieutenant-Admiral-General M.A.de Ruyter. Besides the red, white and blue flags a waft, an ordinary flag, an ordinary, a red and a blue pennant, an ordinary, a red and a green jack and a blue top standard were used for making signals.

1691

Signalbook of Vice-Admiral P.van Almonde. In the pictures we find the following flags: Prince flag; Triple Prince Flag; Red flag; White flag; Blue flag; Yellow flag; red and white horizontal striped flag (4

red and 3 white stripes); Royal standard; Union flag; English flag (red); red, white and blue pennant; Red pennant; White pennant; Blue pennant; (the last named 4 talking pennants in 16 positions, i.e. 64 possibilities); Prince jack; Red jack.

1746

Signalbook of N.Govertsz. The same as in the following book, omitting 14. The broad pennant is shown in the colours red, white, blue and yellow. The red and white striped flag has 4 red and 4 white stripes.

1747

Signalbook of Captain Bombled. He names the flags in the following order: 1.Prince flag; 2.Double Prince flag; 3.Red flag; 4.White flag; 5.Blue flag; 6.Yellow flag; 7.Red and white striped flag (4 red and 3 white stripes); 8.White flag with a red cross, or Genese flag; 9. Yellow and white striped flag (7 yellow bends); 10.Red flag with a white cross, or Danish flag; 11.Blue flag with a red cross; 12.Blue and white striped flag; 13.Red and white striped flag; 14.State Jack (only for court-martial); 15.Royal standard; 16.Union flag; 17.English flag (red); 18. Broad pennant (in the book coloured red, but according to the text is it a talking pennant, so it could be any colour); 19.Pennant(red, white and blue); 20. Jack (Netherlands: stripes red-white-blue).

1757

Painting of the ship Princes Carolina. All the above mentioned flags are shown with the exception of the English flags (nrs 15,16 and 17) and the yellow one (nr 6), but at the other hand it shows a blue flag with a yellow cross (the Swedish flag). The red and white striped flag has 4 red and 4 white stripes. The yellow and white flag is horizontally striped (4 yellow and 4 white).

1756

Signalbook of Rear-Admiral Count of Bylandt.Although the book contains a chart of the 12 signalflags and 5 signal-pennants, no colours are inserted. Now only 4 positions to hoist the flags are to be used, the 3 mast-tops and the top of the mizzen-yard. As the yellow flag was included in the set of 1781 we might

accept that he was also in use in 1756. So the 12 flags could have been Nrs. 3 - 12 of Captain Bombled plus the blue wit yellow cross.

1781

Signalbook of Captain Knight J.H. Van Kinsbergen. The following flags are shown in a table, but their numbers are not inserted: Blue; Red and white striped (5 red, 4 white); Red with a white cross; Blue and red vertically divided; Yellow; White with a red cross; Red; Blue and white striped (5 blue, 4 white); Red and white vertically divided; White and red vertically divided. Split broad pennants: Blue and red vertically divided; Red and white vertically divided; White and red vertically divided. Talking pennants (split narrow pennants): No. 1. Red, white and blue striped; No. 2. White and black vertically striped; No. 3. White; No. 4. Blue; No. 5. Red; No. 6. Blue and white vertically striped; No. 7. White and red vertically striped; No. 8. Yellow and blue vertically striped; No. 9. Red and yellow vertically striped; No. 10. White with a red cross.

1791

A new edition of the above mentioned book. Here numbers are inserted (changes are indicated +). Flags: +No. 1. Blue with a diagonal white cross; +No. 2. Red and white striped (3 red, 2 white); No. 3. Red with a white cross; +No. 4. Blue and red vertically striped with a white square in the centre; +No. 5. Yellow with a blue square in the centre; No. 6. White with a red cross; +No. 7. Red, white and red striped; +No. 8. Blue and white striped (3 blue, 2 white); No. 9. Red and white vertically striped; No. 10. White and red vertically striped. Table pennants (split broad pennants): No. 1. Blue and red vertically striped; No. 2. (New) Red and blue vertically striped with a white ball in the red; No. 3. (New) White with a blue triangle; No. 4. (New) White and blue vertically striped; No. 5. (New) Yellow and black vertically striped; No. 6. (New) Black and white vertically striped; No. 7. Red and white vertically striped; No. 8. White and red vertically striped. Talking or number pennants (split narrow pennants): +No. 1. Yellow with a blue cross; No. 2. White and black vertically striped (10 white, 9 black); +No. 3. White

and red vertically striped (former No.7.); +No.4. Blue with a white cross; +No.5.Red with a white cross No.6.Blue and white vertically striped; +No.7.White with a blue cross, and red, vertically divided; No.8. Yellow and blue vertically striped; No.9.Red and yellow vertically striped; +No.10.White with a red cross (former No.6.).

1794

Convoy signal-book. The talking pennants are the same as above. The broad split pennants are called standards: No.1.Red and white vertically striped; No.2. White and red vertically striped; No.3. Blue and red vertically striped; No.4.Black and white vertically striped; No.5.Yellow and black vertically striped. The flags are the same but with different numbers: No.1=1; No.2=7; No.3=9; No.4=10; No.5=4; No.6=6; No.7=3; No.8=2; No.9=8; No.10=5. The table of the flags is handpainted on a blank page. The blue square in the yellow flag is not drawn. The red and white striped flag, and the blue and white striped flag have 4 coloured and 4 white stripes.

1808

New edition of the book of 1791. No changes.

1820

Telegraphic Signal-Book (till 1875).Following changes of the flags in use: No.2.Red and white vertically striped (4 red, 4 white){apparently to avoid confusion with No.8.}; No.8.Blue and white striped (4 blue, 3 white). Broad blue pennant (plit). Distinction flag of blue with a big white square (to indicate that the signals were made from this book).

1855

Signal-book. The following changes: Flags: No.1.Quartered white and blue; No.2. Red and white vertically striped (4 red, 3 white); No.0 (= 10).White and red striped; No.10.Red; No.11.White; No.12.Blue;(10, 11 & 12 repetition flags); Pennants (no longer split): No.7.Black and with a white ball; No.8. Black and white vertically striped (5 black, 4 white); No.9.Red and white vertically striped; No.0.White and red striped; No.10.Red; No.11.White; No.12.Blue;(10, 11 & 12 : or repetition pennants, slightly different; squad-

ron pennants.).

1875

Signal-book. No changes. The pennants are omitted, except the blue one as a contrasignal. Red and white flag omitted, the blue one remains as a contrasignal.

1890

Signal-book.

No changes. The telegraph flag of 1820 is reintroduced.

1901

Signal-book. A set of 24 flags is introduced, indicated by letters, plus the blue flag as a contrasignal. A. Yellow standard with blue cross; B. Red and yellow striped standard (4 red, 3 yellow); C. Yellow and blue vertically striped standard; D. Red and yellow striped pennant; E. White and blue striped pennant; F. Red pennant with a white ball; G. Yellow pennant with a blue triangle; H. White and red vertically striped pennant; I-J. Blue and white vertically striped pennant (3 blue 2 white); K. Red and white vertically striped flag (4 red, 3 white). (Former No. 2.); L. Quartered white and blue flag (Former No. 1.); M. 12 red and white squares, flag; N. Blue and white diagonally divided in 4 parts, top-triangle blue; O. Red with a white cross flag (Former No. 3.); P. Blue flag with a yellow diagonal cross; Q. Red flag with a yellow diamond; R. Yellow, blue and yellow striped flag; S. White flag with a red cross (Former No. 6.); T. Blue and white striped flag (4 blue 3 white) (Former No. 8.); U. Red, white and red striped flag (Former No. 7); V. Blue flag with 2 diagonal yellow stripes; W. Red and white flag vertically divided (Former No. 9.); Y. Blue, white and blue striped flag, vertically divided; Z. Blue and red striped flag with a white square (Former No. 4.).

1914

International flags and pennants.

1929

The new set of international flags and pennants (10 number pennants).

1957

10 additional numberflags are introduced, as well as 15 pennants and 1 flag with specific meanings.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1) Page Y-2 from the signal-book of 1691 (Van Almonde). Red, white and blue flag in the maintop = Admiral. Blue flag in mizzen-top.
- 2) Pages 24 and 25 from the signal-book of 1746 (N. Govertsz). (24) Upper picture: yellow and white striped flag; Lower picture: Union flag. (25) Upper picture: red flag; Lower picture: blue flag.
- 3) Pages 46 and 47 from the signal-book of 1746 (N. Govertsz). (46) Upper picture: red flag with a white cross and a red pennant; Lower picture: blue and white flag and red pennant. (47) Upper picture: double Prince flag and red pennant; Lower picture: blue flag with a red cross and red pennant.
- 4) Painting of the ship Prinses Carolina (1757) dressed overall.
- 5) Picture of the battle of the Doggersbank (1781). Third ship on the foreground from the left (A), the flag-ship of Admiraal De Ruyter flies the red and white striped flag (ranging flag) from the foretop (Vice-Admiral's position) and a red, white and blue flag from the mizzen-top, indicating the rank of the Rear-Admiral Zoutman. The big red, white and blue flag underneath is the national flag hoisted there because the flagstaff was shot away. First ship on the foreground from the right (B) is the "Admiraal-Generaal" commanded by Captain J.H.van Kinsbergen, second in command. Therefore the red and white striped flag is flown from the mizzen-top (Rear-Admiral's position). The national flag is flown from the flagstaff at the stern.

STADT-FAHNE VON DOKKUM

Der Stadtvorstand von Dokkum (Fryslân; Niederlande) hatte zur Begrüssung der Anwesenden (in Dokkum findet man die grösste Flaggenfabrikationsanlagen in der Benelux) und zu Ehren der Stadt Temse seine Stadt-Fahne im Raum der Vorlesungen ausgestellt. Die Fahne galt zugleich als ein tastbares Beispiel bei der Vorlesung des Herrn Kl.Sierksma.



Lijnen tekenen Aemerit van de
Arria Gaone om overftuurboord te
Te Draiven



Voor de Bronders in het Divisie vanden
Admiraal vande Witte Vlag.



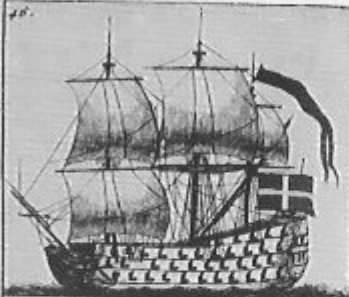
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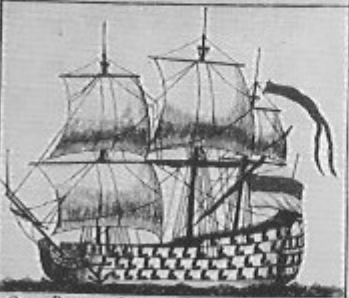
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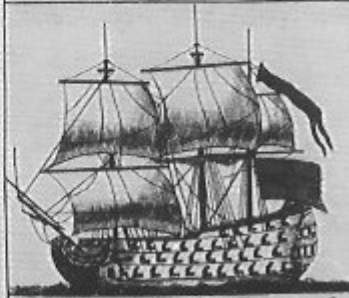
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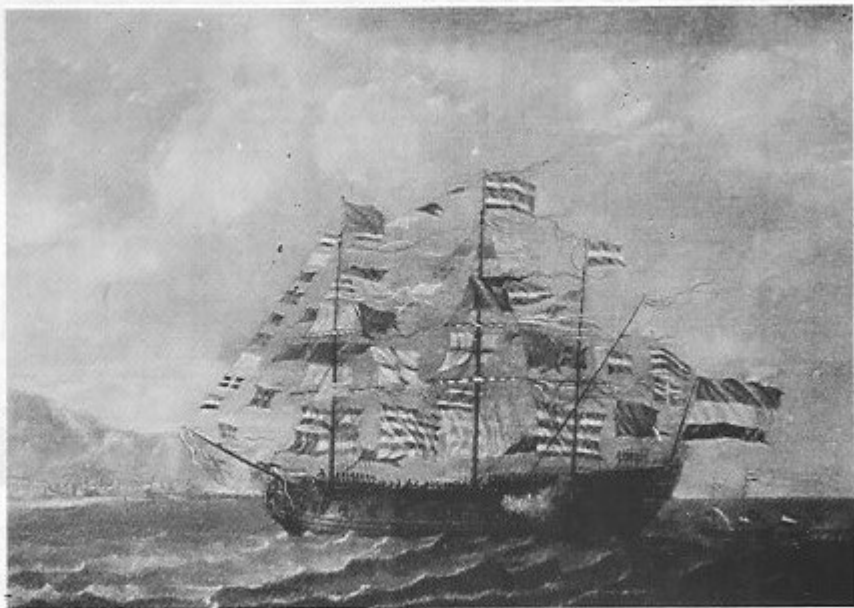
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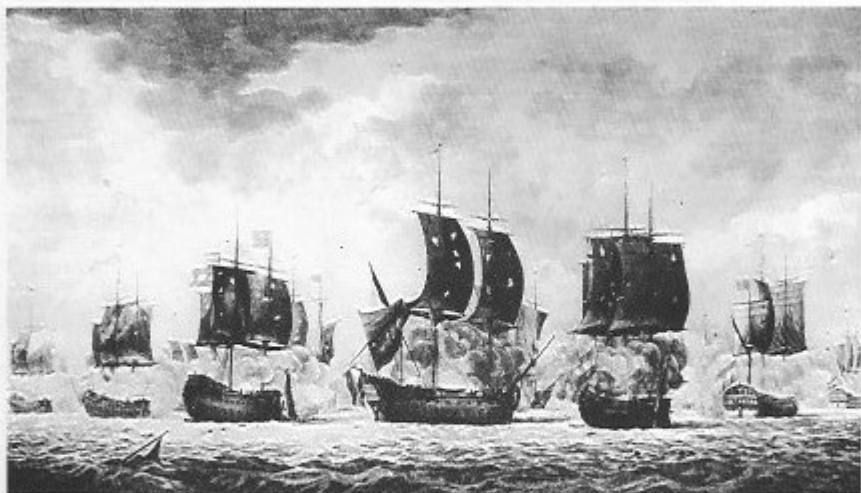


*Een Particulier Schip Jagen tusfen
het Zuyden, en Westen.*



*Een Particulier Schip Jagen tusfen
het Oosten, en Zuyden.*





Slag op DOCCERSBANK.



Action de DOCCERSBANK.