

The Dutch East India Company's ships' armament in the 17th and 18th centuries: an overview

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The Dutch East India Company existed from 1602 till 1795. During that period its activities varied but always included trade between Europe and Asia as well as inter-Asian trade. The company exercised, under a charter from the Dutch Republic, certain sovereign rights, for example the right to wage war or to enter into treaties with foreign powers outside Europe. The protection of such interests of the company as trade routes and fortified settlements required a certain amount of mobile specialized military power.

The company, therefore, during the two centuries of its existence maintained a standing army stationed on its ships and in its overseas settlements.

The principal business of the company being intercontinental transport, a fleet of armed merchantmen was kept both for commercial and military purposes. The development of a satisfactory compromise between an efficient cargo carrier and a powerful weapon platform remained an important concern throughout the period of existence of the company. Results of the discussions on this subject can now be traced in the resolutions of the Directors of the Company (Archives of the 'Heren XVII') and in the excavated remains of ships of the former Dutch East India Company.

The earliest period of the company between 1602 and 1665 is characterized by a great variety of ships and armaments.

Ships were built by the company in its own shipyards in Amsterdam, Middelburg, Rotterdam and Enkhuizen but were also bought from private shipyards. There were efforts to standardize specifications for ships and weapons but these were frustrated by local interests and particularities. In practice the company's ships were built somewhat similar to warships, and

their armaments followed roughly the example of the navy.

A large East Indiaman, the *Amsterdam* was armed in 1604 with 4 bronze 24 pounders, 4 bronze 18 pounders, 14 iron 9 pounders, 4 iron 3½ pounders, 2 small iron cannon for the boats, 4 bombards in wooden stocks and 8 iron swivel-guns. The crew numbered about 170 sailors while about 50 soldiers were carried.

Cannon were acquired from specialized merchants who, like the house of *De Geer*, controlled the trade in Swedish iron cannon. Small local foundries provided the bronze ordnance following the local technological and design traditions.

Since price was probably the principal criterion for the choice of a particular cannon this made for a wide variety in material, quality and size.

While maintaining a considerable number of fairly heavy cannon on board its ships, the main armament of large East Indiaman included a number of 24 pounders throughout the 17th century, the company continually sought the solution of the resulting weight problem. Experiments were undertaken with large calibre-low weight composite cannon such as were found in the excavation of the wreck of the *Batavia* (1629) off the coast of Western Australia (Stanbury, 1975). These composite cannon were based on a patent taken out in 1627 by a man called *Jan de Rycker* (Doorman, 1940). A company was established to manufacture composite cannon under the name *Compagnie van het geslaegen geschut van verscheiden metaelen* (company of wrought ordnance of various metals) evidently providing composite cannon for both the East and West India companies until well into the 1630s (Van Dillen).

Evidently this experiment was unsuccessful, for the solution to the weight problem was later

sought in the reduction of the calibre of the main armament of the company's ships.

This development can be traced in the resolutions of the directors of the company; rationalization and standardization of both armament and ammunition became important considerations for the fleet of the East India Company.

After the adoption of a standard model of musket for sea- and another for landservice, a continuous series of resolutions on *monture* (ship's artillery) beginning in 1669 were made. Not only were the types and calibres of cannon standardized but the quantities and quality of ammunition and gunner's equipment were also laid down. The resolution of 9 August 1729 shows the final stage of the company's effort to lighten and standardize ships ordnance. The largest type of East Indiaman (160 ft) was armed in times of war on the trade routes with 10 iron 12 pounders, 18 iron 8 pounders, 6 iron 4 pounders and 10 bronze swivel guns. If possible, the two 12 pounders nearest to the compasses were issued in bronze, not iron. Such ships carried 150 crew and a complement of 150 soldiers on the outgoing voyage. On the return voyage more cargo was

carried, sometimes making the use of the lower gundeck cannon impossible.

Ammunition came to 50 rounds per cannon, half were round shot, the rest special projectiles such as canister shot and various pyrotechnics. All necessary equipment was specified in great detail in a printed inventory which each captain received, called *equipagelijst*.

Thus, after a century of experience the Dutch East India Company had become a highly organized, administratively efficient, multinational company. A worldwide commercial network, staffed by a multitude of Europeans and Asians, was connected by a fleet consisting of a few types of specialized vessels manned, equipped and run according to rigorous specifications.

The efficient and profitable organization ground to a halt only when it was confronted with a shift in trade patterns combined with the emergence of nations powerful enough to send modern warships to Asia for the protection and extension of their trade. By the end of the 18th century the period of the armed merchantmen, on which a commercial empire could be built, was past (Roessingh, 1982).

References

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