

## The Battle of Sole Bay (re-enactment)

**Continuing his series of wargames articles following the military career of James Stuart (King James II of England), Simon MacDowall delves into the Anglo-Dutch Wars (1652-1674) when most of the action was at sea. He describes the challenges faced by a group of naval wargaming novices staging a re-creation of the Battle of Sole Bay (28 May, 1672) when James Stuart, then the Duke of York, personally commanded the English fleet.**

### The Anglo-Dutch Wars

The English have a long history of close cooperation, friendship and alliance with the Dutch. Yet it was not always so. In the mid-17th century the English and Dutch were bitter rivals for trade, colonies and control of the seas. With their stranglehold over the lucrative spice trade from modern Indonesia, the Dutch Republic was in the ascendancy in the mid-17th century. This led to the First Anglo-Dutch war with Cromwell's England which ended with English naval dominance in the North Sea. In the decades following the restoration of King Charles II of England. Louis XIV of France was also concerned at the growing power and wealth of the Dutch and decided to do something about it. This led to an alliance between Charles II and Louis XIV, and renewed war with the Dutch United Provinces.

The Second Dutch war (1665 – 1667) was a bit of a disaster for England. It started out well enough when the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam in America was captured before hostilities had formally begun. It was renamed New York in honour of James, Duke of York. James himself commanded the English fleet of more than 100 ships at the Battle of Lowestoft (1665), winning a decisive victory over a similar sized Dutch fleet.

For England it went downhill from there. At the Four Days' Battle (1666) — probably the longest naval engagement in European history — the Dutch sunk or captured 23 English ships, losing only four themselves. Then, in 1667, Admiral Michiel de Ruyter led the Dutch up the Medway to destroy the English fleet at Chatham. The stern of the Royal Charles — flagship of the English fleet — can still be seen today displayed in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Medway, or Chatham, was the worst defeat ever suffered by the Royal Navy and it ended the war with advantage to the Dutch.

Hostilities broke out again in 1672. Charles II of England (Scotland was a separate country at that time) and Louis XIV of France had a plan to attack the Dutch United Provinces by land and sea. The French army would advance north to attack by land. Meanwhile the English fleet commanded by James Duke of York, would rendezvous with the French fleet off the Suffolk coast at Southwold — more or less the closest place on the English coast to Holland. After resupplying and refitting they would sail east to blockade the Dutch ports.

The Dutch, however, did not wait passively for this to happen. Admiral de Ruyter sailed overnight to attack the English and French before they set off. The first Dutch sails (or more probably lanterns) were sighted at 2:30 am when the 93 ships of the allied fleet were at anchor, many of the 35,000 sailors were on shore leave and James Duke of York was tucked up in bed at the Sutherland House. This building still stands today in Southwold serving as an up-market restaurant and hotel, said to be haunted by one of James' abandoned mistresses. The patch of coast off Southwold is still called Sole Bay even if erosion makes it hard to picture it as a proper bay today.

## **The Battle of Sole Bay**

The Dutch had the wind behind them as they moved in on the Anglo-French fleet at anchor in the early hours of 28 May, 345 years ago (old Julian calendar). The English and French not only had had to get their sailors back on board but would have struggled against the wind to get away from shore where the shallower draught Dutch ships had an advantage. Getting in close to shore was one of de Ruyter's favourite tactics.

As the fleets manoeuvred for position, the French warships broke away to the south, followed by a Dutch squadron. They fought an entirely separate inconclusive action. This gave the Dutch a numerical superiority over the remaining English ships. Why the French did this is not known. It may well have been that Louis XIV had ordered his admiral, Jean II d'Estrées, to support the English but not to lose any ships.

The fighting was intense. The Duke of York's flagship, HMS Prince, was attacked by several vessels, including fireships. She was so badly damaged that James was forced to transfer his flag to HMS St Michael. When the latter also succumbed to severe damage, he and his staff were rowed through the thick of the action to HMS London. The 100-gun HMS Royal James fought a fierce action with the much smaller Groot Hollandia, two fireships and the 82-gun Dolphijn. Eventually a third fireship grappled the Royal James, setting her on fire.

The battle ended in stalemate; the Dutch lost the Stavoren (captured) and the Jozua (sunk), sustaining roughly 1600 casualties, including Lieutenant Admiral Willem Joseph van Ghent. A third Dutch ship exploded shortly after the battle while undergoing repairs. The English lost the HMS Royal James (burnt) and the HMS Royal Katherine (captured), although the Royal Katherine was recaptured after the Dutch prize crew discovered the ship's brandy store and drank themselves senseless! English losses were approximately 2500, including Admiral Edward Montagu, the Earl of Sandwich, who drowned when the Royal James was sunk. His body later washed up on shore near Thorpeness, identified by the Star and Garter insignia on his coat. The French ship Superbe was heavily damaged and the French suffered about 450 casualties.

Although the battle was relatively indecisive, the Dutch prevented the Allies from blockading their home ports, so it was a strategic Dutch victory.

## **A Wargame Proposition**

When one of our group expressed a desire to re-fight the Battle of Sole Bay, his almost throw-away comment was met with a great deal of interest. All of us live near the East Anglian coast and my home is only 3 miles away from Sole Bay. There was one slight problem. None of us had ever fought a naval wargame before and the number of ships we had between us was precisely zero. With close to 90 ships on each side, the Battle of Sole Bay had three times as many ships as fought at Trafalgar. Was it feasible to contemplate doing this from scratch?

"Wouldn't it be great to do it in Southwold, overlooking the bay?" Said Ernie Fosker — the original proponent of the idea. I live very close by so that could work but my inland wargames room did not exactly overlook Sole Bay. We all agreed that it would be a very good idea but one which unfortunately was unlikely to happen.

Weeks later I was in Southwold's Lord Nelson pub which is only a few metres from the coast where the original battle took place. There, I overheard a conversation between two people involved with Southwold's Sailor's Reading Room. Overlooking Sole Bay, the Sailor's Reading Room was built in 1864 as a refuge for fishermen and mariners when not engaged at sea, as an endeavour to keep them out of the pubs and encourage them in Christian ideals. Displays of a seafaring nature line the walls and fill glass cabinets, including a mural of the Battle of Sole Bay and several large model ships which fought in the action.

The snippets of conversation I picked up were about the military history of the area and so very gently I butted in, relaying our desire to re-create the battle of Sole Bay in miniature in an appropriate venue overlooking the bay. It turned out that one of the pair was Laurence Vulliamy, a local resident who had been a producer and director on BBC's Time Team series. He was intrigued by the idea of re-creating the battle in the Sailors' Reading Room and before we knew it they had opened their doors to us, offering up the snooker table with boards on top to re-fight the battle. It just so happened that 28 May 2017 was the 345th anniversary of the battle — if we chose to ignore the differences between the Julian and Gregorian calendars. Modern Southwold is a holiday destination and 28 May fell on a Sunday of a bank holiday weekend (long weekend for North American readers). Many tourists would be in town and an event like ours would attract visitors interested in understanding more about local history.

So a proposition was born. We could use the Southwold Sailors' Reading Room overlooking Sole Bay for our game in exchange for making it open to the public and providing a running commentary. It seemed like a great deal. The only problem was that we had no ships and no experience with naval wargames — let alone staging one which would be held in the public eye.

### **Where to Start?**

We had two criteria. Whatever rules we used had to be very simple — easy for novices to understand and easy to explain to the public. Secondly our fleets had to be relatively quick to raise and paint by a group of complete naval novices just dipping our toes into the salt water.

Taking the second point first, we had to decide on a scale. Each side in the historical battle had more or less 90 ships with fireships in addition to ships of the line. This was a pretty big proposition to start from scratch so quite early on we decided that the number of ships had to be scaled down. In the end we went for a rough ratio of 1 model representing 4 actual ships.

So what scale models to use? The standard for naval wargames seems to be 1:1200 scale and there are some really beautiful models available in that size. These would have the advantage of standing out on the table for the visitors to see. Although many of us had the modelling and painting skills necessary to give justice to the beauty of the ship models in this scale, we were basically a group of landlubbers that had to build up large fleets from a standing start with limited time to do it in.

As wargamers whose main interests lay firmly on dry land, none of us were yet ready to spend the time needed to fix the rigging and paint up fine details on each individual ship for such large fleets. Therefore we opted for 1:2400 scale models from *Tumbling Dice Miniatures*. They have a complete range of vessels for the Anglo-Dutch wars including wrecks, fireships and smaller craft. The beauty of this smaller scale was that we could

relatively quickly paint up the models we needed, dividing up the various squadrons amongst our group to assemble and paint.

We all found fixing the sails to the masts more than a little bit fiddly, often gluing fingers together more successfully than the tiny bits of metal. That said they were a joy to paint. Each of us used different methods but the trick was a series of washes over base coats with dry-brushing to pick out the highlights. In this way a squadron of 4-6 ships could easily be painted up in a day. Painting guides for two of the methods we used can be downloaded for free from my website at <http://legio-wargames.com/12400-ships/4593888853>

For those with an enduring interest in naval wargaming 1:1200 may be the best scale but each individual ship will require the same sort of attention one might devote to a 54mm figure. If, like us, you want to raise massed fleets relatively quickly and easily then 1:2400 is probably a better scale to go for than 1:1200, especially if you wish to stage a big battle like Sole Bay.

So what about rules? Casting around and sampling various naval rule sets we found that most were far too complex for what we needed. We were novices doing a one-off which would be conducted in public. What we required was something as simple as possible which gave the right feel without becoming bogged down in complexity even if this meant sacrificing some of the finer points of naval warfare. In the end we decided to adapt a fast play set of rules originally published by Neil Fox in the now defunct *Wargames Journal*. Only three pages long they gave us all we needed. To top it off we were able to press gang Neil into our project. Our adaptation of Neil's rules are available as a free download from my website at: <http://legio-wargames.com/pike-and-shot/4537125084>

The final decision we had to make was about the playing surface. My initial idea was to lay a blue felt over the boards covering the snooker table. Then looking out over the North Sea I saw all sorts of colours apart from the sky blue of the available felts. It occurred to me that we could distress the felt with various spray paints as I have distressed my green felt for land wargames. Early experiments with this proved far from satisfactory. Then I came across *Terrain Mats* based in nearby Ipswich ([www.terrainmats.com](http://www.terrainmats.com)). Hand crafted and made to order they are not cheap but the result is spectacular. Not wanting our tiny 1:2400 scale ships to get lost on the 12 x 6 foot snooker table I ordered a 6 x 8 foot seascape to allow the non-playing space to be filled up with rules, dice and all the detritus of a wargame without impinging on the playing area. What we ended up with was a playing surface which actually looked like the North Sea and set off our tiny models beautifully.

## **The Game**

We set up according to the historical dispositions on the day, 345 years ago. The Dutch, in three squadrons (van, centre and rear) were deployed in a double line coming in from the northeast table edge with the wind at their back. On the southwestern corner, the Blue and Red English squadrons, also in two lines, were in front with the French fleet behind. From this point on the two Dutch and two Anglo-French players were free to make their own decisions.

The umpire imposed two conditions which the players were unaware of in advance — one historical and one quite fanciful. The first was that, at an appropriately inopportune time, the French fleet would turn about and start heading off in a south-easterly direction away

from the battle. A further constraint was that no French ship could come into close range of any Dutch ship unless it was clear that a Dutch defeat was imminent.

The second fanciful umpire interjection was the appearance of the Flying Dutchman — the legendary ghost ship after which the Adnams brewery in Southwold has named its Ghost Ship beer while Adnams' Broadside commemorates the Battle of Sole Bay. The sudden appearance of the Flying Dutchman out of the mist would cause temporary panic amongst nearby crews — just enough to add a bit of fun but not so much as to distort the game.

The Dutch players intended to use their advantage of wind to strike hard and fast. As the player representing Admiral de Ruyter put it:

“With the advantage of the weather gauge, I planned to swiftly attack the 2 English squadrons, hoping that the 3 Dutch divisions could out-number and overwhelm them before the French could intervene. Taking advantage of the wind behind, I would launch the fireships like missiles at the bunched English ships. I hoped that the fireships would cause confusion, damage and break up the enemy formations whilst I could avoid the English fireships that would have to sail into the wind. I would then either turn to sail along the line, hoping to out-shoot individual ships, or get stuck into the English fleet and attack the damaged ships with double-broadsides. By using the wind, I hoped to close to contact quick enough to negate the advantage of the raking shots the English would be able to inflict on me.”

After a few practice games in which the Anglo-French suffered heavily from trying to turn into the wind to meet the Dutch, The Anglo-French players decided to hold a steady course towards the north as the Dutch came in from the northeast with the wind behind them. By doing so they would offer up their flank to the Dutch but, unlike land warfare, the flank is not the weakest part of the line. It is the strongest as all the serious guns are on the sides of the ships. As the player representing the Earl of Sandwich put it: “The Most Gracious Duke of York gave me my orders — beat the Dutch. So I did.”

As the two front Dutch squadrons closed in fast they sent their fireships out ahead but this did not quite work out as they had hoped. One exploded prematurely, one was sunk by English cannon fire and the others sailed on through gaps in the English line after the crews had bailed out. Ironically the only successful fireship came from the English. It contacted the Maagd van Dordrecht and set her on fire.

Coming into close range of the English Red Squadron, commanded by James Duke of York, the Dutch suffered a devastating raking fire and Admiral de Ruyter was killed. The rear Dutch Squadron then moved in to cut off the head of the Earl of Sandwich's Blue Squadron. They had some success but the devastation amongst the van and centre of the Dutch fleet was so catastrophic that the hope of an historical Dutch victory was rapidly fading.

As it became obvious that fortune was turning from the Dutch, the umpire allowed the French fleet to turn back towards the action to claim some honour from the impending victory. In the last stages of the game the French flagship (St Phillippe) successfully grappled the Eendracht and captured her. The game ended with a clear Anglo-French victory.

Apart from Neil Fox — the author of the original rules we had adapted — few of us had any real grasp of naval tactics and only the most basic idea of what to do with a squadron

of model ships under our command. As a group of landlubbers we were inspired by the interesting possibilities offered by war at sea. To our surprise we found it interesting, exciting and highly satisfying. This may have been our first but it is unlikely to be our last naval wargame — especially now that we have fleets of Dutch, English and French ships. The simplicity of the rules allowed us to play the game without being bogged down in detail. As the game went on we began to understand the subtleties of using the wind, concentrating fire, and ‘getting there fastest with the mostest’ to paraphrase Nathan Forrest.

## **Public Interaction**

Staging a game in public was not something we had ever done before. Some of us had run demonstration or participation games at various wargames’ shows but our Battle of Sole Bay was a very different proposition. We would be playing the game in front of hundreds of non-wargaming visitors.

How many of us have been disappointed at a wargames’ show on approaching an interesting looking table only to be ignored or rebuffed? With a non-wargaming public we could not allow this to happen. Therefore I volunteered to give a running commentary through the day — interacting with the public while others got on with the serious business of playing the game. We produced a simple two sided sheet of A4 (roughly 8 1/2 x 11 for North American readers) which gave the historical background on one side and a bit about the game, the venue and the local museum on the other. We laminated it and left several copies strategically distributed around the room for visitors to pick up and read at their leisure. As new groups of visitors came in I did my best to corral them and give them my spiel while the players got on with the game.

We were astounded by the great interest shown by the steady stream of visitors of all ages and gender. Some were locals but most were visitors from elsewhere. Few had any knowledge of the historical battle and seemed fascinated by the fact that they were on the nearest point of land where, 345 years ago, they would have seen nearly 200 ships fighting it out.

At one point I was telling a few youngsters about fireships, talking down to them as adults have a propensity to do with children on the assumption that they do not really understand. One girl, maybe around 12 years old, piped up... “Isn’t that how we defeated the Spanish Armada?” I was put firmly back into my place and resolved never again to underestimate the young!

Most surprising of all was the high degree of interest the non-wargaming public showed in the mechanics of the game. “What are the dice for?” “Why is he doing that?” Were frequent refrains. The simplicity of the rule mechanisms we used made it relatively easy for me to explain the probability of damage that might, for example, be inflicted by a broadside from a fresh first-rater with an elite crew.

By splitting the interaction with the public from the game itself we managed to achieve the best of both worlds. It was not a ‘demonstration game’. With one of us dedicated to explaining the action to visitors the players were able to fight it out more or less as they would have, had they been doing it in private. It took longer of course. We opened the doors to the public at 11 am and closed at 5 pm. Without interruption we probably would have concluded the game in 3 hours but the interaction with the public added to our enjoyment and made for a most memorable day. When it all was over we retired to the

Sutherland House — James Duke of York's land headquarters — for an excellent celebratory dinner.

The 350th anniversary of the Battle of Sole Bay will be in 5 years' time and this will present a great occasion to re-stage the game in Southwold once again.

### **Other Wargaming Possibilities**

If you are land wargamers intrigued by naval warfare in the age of sail, the Anglo-Dutch wars are a pretty good place to start. Most of the key engagements were fought at sea and once you have your miniature fleets assembled there are plenty of historical actions they could fight from Lowestoft to Sole Bay. The Medway was the most significant action of the age but it offers a number of challenges. Not only was it fought in the close confines of a river but there were shore batteries and land fortifications which played a part. For those with the modelling skills and patience to build up the appropriate land and river terrain it would make for a spectacular wargame. Rule sets would need to be adapted to take into account current and tide along with treacherous shallows, sandbars and shoals.

### **What of warfare on land?**

There were a few small Dutch landings on the East coast of England and these could make for interesting skirmish games. What-if scenarios could also be devised for small actions in the colonies from New Amsterdam/New York to Tangiers, the Caribbean, India and the Spice Islands (modern Indonesia). The main land actions, however, took place in the low countries between the French and Dutch. Louis XIV's French army had an English contingent for those interested in following the fortunes of James Stuart's military exploits even if he did not command them himself. The English soldiers were led initially by the Duke of Monmouth and afterwards by John Churchill (later the Duke of Marlborough), Both of these men saw action at the siege of Maastricht (1673) alongside the Comte d'Artagnan of Three Musketeers fame.

For those interested in land warfare at this time the excellent *Northstar 1672 Range* is purpose built for the Third Anglo-Dutch War. Miniatures from the later War of the Grand Alliance are also perfectly suitable. Many manufacturers' *Pirate* ranges are dressed appropriately for the Anglo-Dutch wars and could be used for naval landing parties and actions in the Caribbean.

### **King James II**

In the 1670s James Stuart had a reasonably good track record as a military commander. At the Battle of the Dunes in 1658 James proved himself on land. At the Battle of Lowestoft (1665) he did the same at sea. He did not win at Sole Bay but his defeat was strategic rather than tactical and in Michiel de Ruyter he was facing the foremost Admiral of the age.

James was crowned King James II of England and James VII of Scotland in 1684. It all went downhill from there as we shall see in the concluding article of this series.