

The Loss of the great silver plate fleet and the Legendary Missing Queen's Dowry

Jamaica, April 26, 1715 MOST SECRET

From Lord Archibald Hamilton, Governor of Jamaica to Their Worships, The Lords of Admiralty

My Lords,

"By late advices from Havana I am told the Galleons from Vera Cruz were daily expected there in order to join the Spanish Ships of War, one of which was the Hampton Court, who are said to have great treasure on board for Old Spain."

Motivated by diplomatic desires, their "Lordships" did not act on Hamilton's intelligence. The Succession war was over and they had observed mourning for the Spanish Queen, just a few months deceased. King Philip was planning to marry again and was busy soliciting wedding presents for Elizabeth Farnesse, Duchess of Palma. It would be the marriage settlement, they decided, that was coming from Havana: if this was the best Hamilton's costly spies could do, then it was about time his accounts had a full audit. A resolution was passed to that effect.

The spies were on to something much bigger however. Spain's annual tribute from the new World was in the range of a staggering 120 million. During the war, they had cancelled all sailings from the Americas to Spain for two years. Now they would send two great fleets to load up at separate ports -- Vera Cruz and Cartagena -- and then meet at Havana. From here they would sail for Spain in a giant combined armada with a heavy naval escort, bearing the accumulated wealth for the last three years.

The Cartagena Fleet, arrived first in Havana, heavily loaded with silver and gold coins, chests filled with Colombian emeralds, and gold jewelry from Peru. By mid-March, this fleet was ready and waiting for the Vera Cruz Fleet, commanded by Captain General Don Juan Esteban de Ubilla. The holds of his ships were stuffed with gold bullion and silver ingots as well.

Once the fleets met, they planned to replenish stores and water and sail a few days after making rendezvous. But because there had been no plate fleet for the last three years, there was a mountain of cases awaiting shipment in Havana. Every merchant set out to wield his maximum weapons in influence and bribery with both the two convoy captains and the pleasure loving and corrupt governor, the 90-year-old Don Casa Torres.

The governor had a substantial personal stake in the fleet, and since there was little or no room left, he and some friends chartered a French cargo ship, *Le Griffon*, captained by Antoine Dare, a wily veteran of the Caribbean to whom the finger points as being Hamilton's informant. Ubilla refused to accept Dare's vessel in their convoy and the matter dragged on before they finally yielded to the governor.



But, the final delay was caused by Philip of Spain himself, who had **decided to marry the Duchess of Palma**. She agreed to go through with the ceremony, **but declined to consummate the marriage until she was decked with the jewels of her choosing**. Urgent word had been sent to the new World,

Philip ordered these elaborate jewels to be brought to him by the 1715 fleet. Jewelry was not a taxable commodity to the Spanish, as a result, was not recorded on official manifests. **Details of the jewelry are sketchy, but the odd items included a heart built up of 130 matched pearls, an emerald ring weighing 74 carats, a pair of earrings each of 14-carat pearls, and a rosary of pure coral the size of small marble. There were eight chests in all, and they stowed in Ubilla's personal cabin.**

Leading the convoy was the former *Hampton Court*. She had been captured from the English during the war, and having been refitted at Greenwich shortly before her loss, was in excellent trim, rather easier in the water than the Spanish ships and possessed of a reasonable turn of speed. Ubilla, as senior flag officer, had chosen her as his flagship. Just over 150 feet long. She carried 74 to 80 cannon and no bulky cargo – just 1,000 tons of treasure another massive warship, the *Nuestra Senora de Carmen San Antonio* brought up the rear.

After a week at sea visibility had become so bad that Ubilla signaled that each ship's poop lantern was to be lit to guide each other. In the afternoon it grew quite dark, the wind came again and by nightfall it was gusting up to 70 knots. The waves rose savagely, the water crashing down on decks, carrying away deck cargo, spars, and cordage. By nightfall, the wind was gusting now to over 100 knots. Ubilla lost his mizzenmast, and the fleet was driven without control towards the breakers on the reefs which line the Florida coast.

First to hit the deadly reefs was Ubilla's flagship, the *Hampton Court*. Dismasted, her rudder carried away, she could make no even the vestige of a fight. She struck at 2:30 on the morning of July 31. The reef ripped the bottom right out of her, then her upper decks ripped from her hull. The poop and aft deck were cast up on a fifty-foot wave. She was tossed around for a few seconds – just long enough for Ubilla and 223 of his crew to be washed off and pounded to death on the rocks. Then the poop, once so splendid a sight at the Greenwich dock that Van de Velde felt compelled to sketch it, was spewed up high and dry on the beach.



The Hampton Court by Van de Velde

All this time the wily Antoine Dare in the *Le Griffon* was playing a hunch. He hadn't liked the official course in the first place, and wanting a little more weather room, had craftily steered a course half a

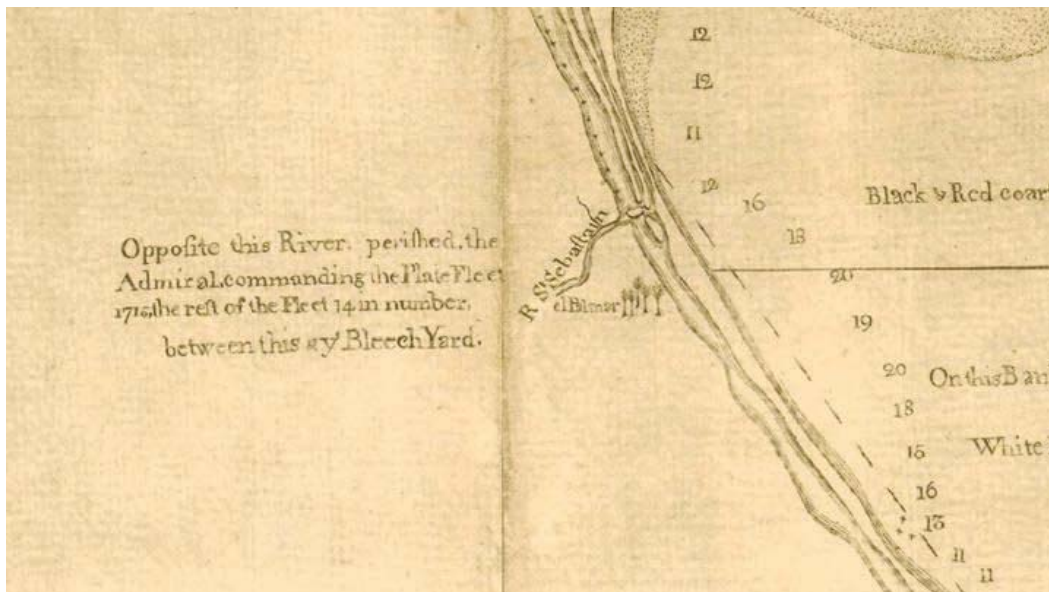
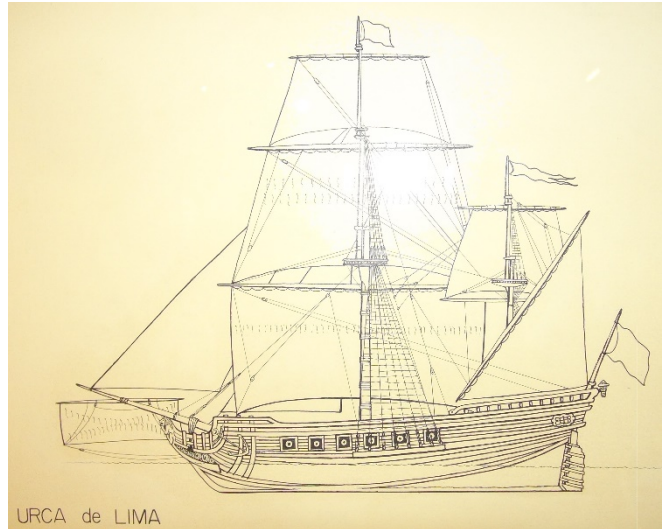
point more easterly. As it turned out, he had just enough room to ride it out, and when the summer dawn broke just after 3:00 a.m., his was the only ship left afloat.

The rest of the fleet were all caught on the rocks. The survivors clambered up on to the beaches, but for two more hours the hurricane screamed around them, sucking many of the weaker back into the water. When daylight came, the wind had ceased, and the survivors began to take stock of themselves and their position. More than 700 men were missing, wreckage and bodies were scattered for almost 30 miles along the bleak uninhabited coast.

The survivors on the beach were organized by the senior officer remaining, Francisco Salmón, A few men traveled North in a small boat that was salvaged from the remains of the fleet.

Within a week they reached St. Augustine and informed the Spanish authorities about the loss of the 1715 treasure fleet. By the end of August relief ships from Havana arrived at the site of the sunken fleet.

After Ubilla's original ship, the *Urca de Lima's*, cargo was salvaged, she was burned down to the waterline to hide her position from pirates and privateers of other nations, who had become aware of the sunken treasure fleet as well.



In December the pirates Henry Jennings and Charles Vane captured a Spanish mail ship and got the exact position of the main Spanish salvage camp and the *Urca de Lima* from its captain Pedro de la Vega.

They surprised the camp with a superior force and Salmón had no choice but to surrender the rest of the salvaged treasure that still remained in the camp. The pirates made

off with about £87,500 of gold and silver.

Eventually the Spanish abandoned their salvage operation. The hazards of shark, barracuda, buccaneers, and Pirates proved too much for them. **Records say that possibly 30 percent of the inventoried value was recovered. But, that anyone knows, the Queen's Dowry was not among what was recovered.**

Pirates around the Caribbean began to hear of a politically embarrassing and secretive item in the hands of the Dutch. One of great value. Could it be that the Dutch had found the queen's dowry?

Officially the answer was no, but had the Dutch stumbled across the wreckage? **Pirates knew that a small hoy of Dutch flag had been seen in the area. The vessel had purportedly take something of great value aboard, and that it was now being held on the captured Castillo fortress -an impregnable fortification hardened against all but the most persistent of mortar attacks.**

Pirates had no immediate ability to crack the fortress. That would likely take a serious bombardment by mortars and a large company of attackers. *If only* there was a war to crack things open and create an opportunity.

Fortunately, rumor had it that a fresh war was brewing. The afore married King Philip V of Spain and his wife Queen Elisabeth Farnese's, at the counsel of an advisor, plotted to retake territories in Italy, and to claim the French throne. An alliance known as **the Quadruple Alliance consisting of England, The Dutch, The French, and The Holy Roman Empire** had risen to stop his aggression.

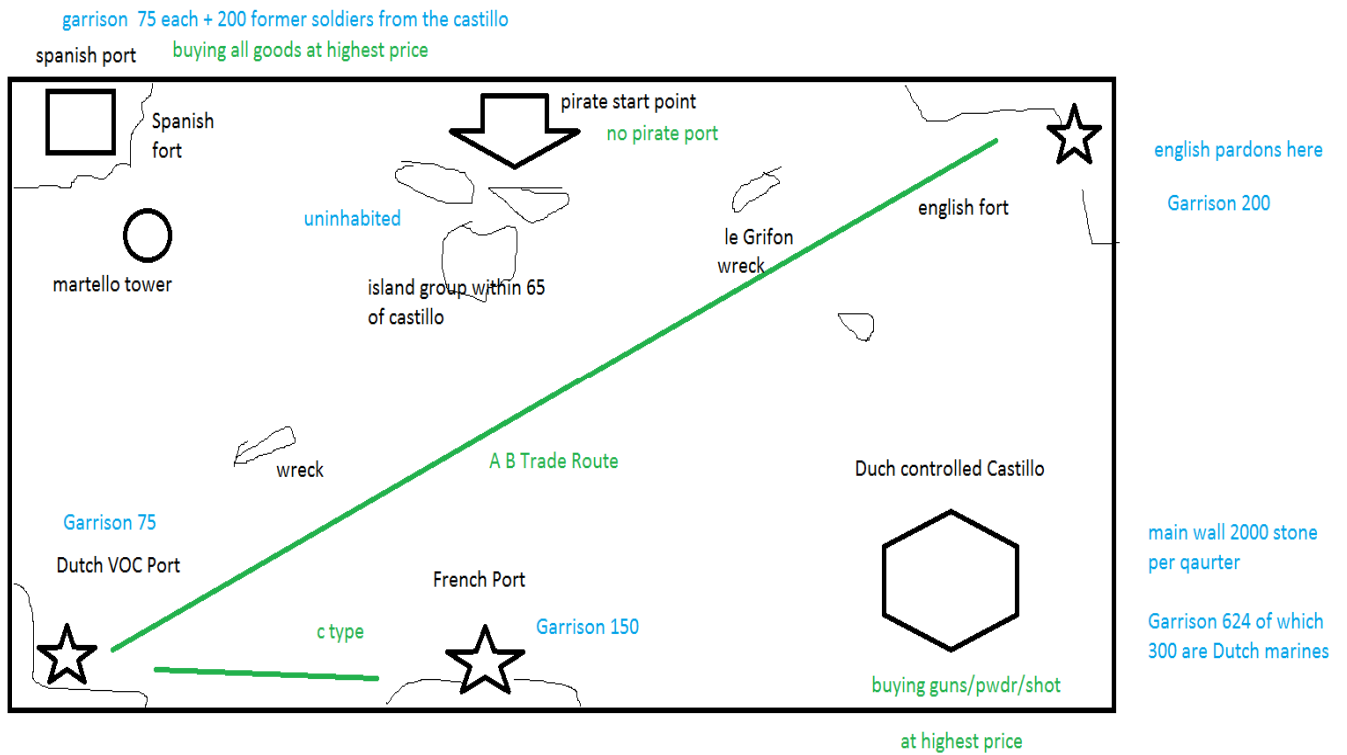
The Castillo was a small but heavily fortified outpost that the Dutch had seized from the Spanish at the outset of hostilities. The Castillo had been somewhat under-garrisoned which made it an easy prize.

The Dutch salvaged a good number of guns from two frigates that were part of the invasion squadron mounting 24 six pound long guns in all and garrisoning nearly 642 men of which 300 were made up of Korps Mariniers, the legendary Dutch Marines.

Talk about New Providence was abuzz with news that on 5 January 1718, a proclamation was issued by the King of England announcing clemency for all piratical offences, provided that those seeking what became known as the "King's Pardon" surrendered not later than 5 September 1718. Colonial governors and deputy governors were authorized to grant the pardon. Word was that an English fleet was on its way with the Pardon to force its acceptance.

A secret group of Pirates decided to leave before the fleet got there and set up a pirate kingdom in Madagascar. All they needed was one final score on the way out. The dowry, assuming the Dutch had it, was perfect. The Dutch could never admit to having it as it would amount to an act of government piracy of the worse sort. It could tip the feelings and fracture the alliance in favor of the Spanish.

The Spanish were already at a state of war, but the alliance was strong in the area, and they lacked forces to unseat the Dutch/English/French Fleet in the area. The pirates and Spanish were mortal enemies, so a direct alliance was likely impossible. But perhaps if things could be arranged so the Spanish could get a mortar battery on a nearby island, the invasion might crack the fortress and open a chance to grab one or many of the priceless 8 chests. The details were tricky. The location of the treasure was not known. Were they all together? Spread out? If the roof caved would it bury the treasure in rubble? Could the Spanish be made to play along? Would the war take a different turn?



- Merchants only start at VOC port, they have their ships fleet points in starting cash
- Merchants can buy mortars or heavy batteries at 10 apiece at VOC port
- Any alliance port or the Dutch fortress will pay 30
- Any Spanish port will pay 40 but trade is blocked from alliance ports
- Dutch Gunboats are assigned to the fort defense and are forbidden from blowing themselves up

Tavern Only Knowledge

- The 8 chests were transferred by prisoners to the innermost room behind the barracks. 18 to 20 roll for knowledge at tavern/not conserved to be the regular tavern roll
- Roll of 20 – the Dutch signal coeds and flag book is bought from a shadowy source in the tavern.

Spanish Knowledge

- Goals: Rid the Caribbean of Piracy / wage war against the alliance (double VP for ships captured) / raid or capture their ports (2000VP each)/ Eventually get the Castillo Back (5000 VP).
- To take the Castillo back would require an invasion force. While the Spanish have no large ships, an ancient prize galleon called the Spitfire, which had for years been a prison hulk is available to the Spanish players. It has 280 hull and a hold capable of holding 6 mortars, assuming it can be kept dry. The ship takes on 4 D20 of water each turn at the end of the gun phase. this turns to hull damage at the end of the turn. Each 1 crew repair can negate one point of water taken. This ship has no crew of its own.
- The 200 former soldiers of the Castillo are not sailors but are veterans and expert marksmen.
- A wreck between the Dutch VOC port and the isles was one of the escaping Spanish transports and according to the Manifest had 6 mortars and 2 great batteries stored in preservative grease in crates in the hold that originally belonged to the Castillo's main battery.

Alliance knowledge

- All alliance ports are considered friendly.
- Goal: The fortress is seeking to upgrade its guns, and will buy at double standard rate any guns larger than a long gun. The player(s) involved in such upgrades receive 100 VP each player involved for each gun.
- Goal: The departing Spanish managed to slip out the fortresses mortar batteries in a transport the week before it fell. The Dutch East India Company can provide replacements for the right price. Restoring the full battery of 6 mortars and 2 great batteries is a major objective (5000 VP)
- The 8 chests held in the fortress armory are a national secret of the Dutch and not to be disturbed unless the fort is going to fall in which case the chests weighs 4 tons apiece.
- Each chest not captured is worth 1000VP for each game per Dutch navy player.
- The Castillo is under the garrison of the Dutch Marines and Navy and is considered to be a naval ship as such.

Pirate only knowledge

- GOAL: The pirates are seeking the 8 chests of the Dowry Ubilla had in his cabin. Each chest of which is worth 5000 VP.
- Pirates are aware that an unnamed wreck between VOC port and the island group has perhaps 4 to 6 mortars. The Dutch are rumored to be seeking mortars.
- GOAL: The only ship to escape the plate fleet disaster (le Grifon) later wrecked between the English port and the island group. This ship has the bribe money her captain received from Governor Hamilton as well as some incriminating paperwork. These can be turned in at the English seaport for 1000 VP.
- GOAL: The English pardons available at the English port might make operating in or around the port easier. Any ship which is pardoned receives 250VP.
- The Pirates captured the Dutch engineer who surveyed the captured fortress as he was returning to europe. In a report found on his person he stated the walls were impregnable but the roof could be breached with a mere 16 mortar shells. He also felt the wings to the left and right of the gates fanned out to rooms which were too close to the outer wall. If the roof were to collapse it may create a wall breach.