It seemed such a clever plan. For years, the Vereenighde Oost-Indische Compagnie had cast covetous eyes on the flow of Mexican silver reaching Manila from the far side of the Pacific. The Spaniards were uninspired traders, but even so they managed to amass tremendous profits from their annual crossings to New Spain. How much better might the Dutch do, if only given access to this closed market? The first Batavian overtures had been rejected by the Philippine authorities, politely but firmly; but the Dutch were willing to resort to more underhanded methods.

Every spring a convoy of Chinese junks sailed from Macao to Manila. The Spaniards bought large quantities of silks, vases and gold jewellery from these visitors, which they consigned to one of the two galleons lying at anchor in the bay. This vessel cleared for New Spain that same summer, reaching the Mexican coast by year's end. A great commercial fair was then held in Acapulco, where the Asian goods were sold at fabulous prices, paid for in Mexican and Peruvian specie. The galleon departed on her return voyage in April, arriving in the Philippines just before her consort set sail on the next crossing. Thus, there was always a galleon circulating between the two Spanish ports.

But when the War of Jenkins' Ear broke out between Britain and Spain, the English Commodore George Anson disrupted this traffic. Rounding South America, he terrorized the west coast of New Spain before crossing the Pacific Ocean and intercepting the homeward-bound Nuestra Señora de Covadonga off Cape Espíritu Santo in June of 1743. The Philippine galleons, although large, were built more for trade than defense, so the Covadonga proved no match for Anson's Centurion. The Spaniard carried 44 small cannon to the man of war's heavy 60, so the issue was quickly decided. The Covadonga was pounded into submission, sailed to China, stripped of more than three million pesos' worth of treasure, and sold off as a hulk.

Panic seized the Spaniards in Manila. Their sole remaining galleon, the Nuestra Señora del Pilar, was also armed with 44 light pieces, so the local merchants were reluctant to consign any cargoes to her. A new 70-gun galleon was being laid down to replace the lost Covadonga, but it would be more than two years before her construction would be complete. Until then, the Spanish feared for their trade.

This delighted the neutral Dutch at Batavia. Learning of the Spaniards' discomfiture, Governor-General Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff hatched a scheme to circumvent the Mexican monopoly. Knowing the Spanish empire to be desperately short of goods because of the Royal Navy's blockade, he believed Dutch East Indiamen might be welcomed in Mexico—especially if the Manila galleon failed to appear. This latter was easy to arrange.

Early in 1745, rumours began reaching Manila from Batavia that the English had returned to the South China Sea, hunting for the galleon. This was enough for the Spaniards to cancel the departure of their Pilar, which had already begun to load. But the story was false, concocted by Van Imhoff and his V.O.C. colleagues to discourage the galleon from sailing. This ploy was made even more convincing by the fact that a British vessel materialized in the Sibuyan Sea, setting up a battery ashore. The Spanish governor was also dying of dysentery, with the Bishop of Ilocos assuming his duties on an interim basis. This unworldly churchman even wrote to Van Imhoff thanking him for the warning, little realizing that he had been duped and that the English intruder was actually acting in concert with the Dutch.

Having disposed of the competition, Van Imhoff moved to the second phase of his scheme. The Dutch vessels Straat van Banda, Zwerver, Galatea and Don Quichote comprised the convoy, with the British privateers Fame and Good Cecil (the latter serving under Dutch colours, although in fact they had been included in case any English blockaders should be encountered). After loading with European goods, the six ships travelled to Macao to buy a cargo of Chinese luxuries, such as the Spaniards themselves carried on their crossings to


Map of Mexico showing the route of the *Hervatting* and the *Hersteller*. 
New Spain. By securing these items directly in China, the Dutch hoped to entice the Mexicans with much better prices.

Thus far everything had gone according to plan, but the convoy was delayed in Macao longer than expected. Word of their destination also leaked out, but there seemed little danger of the news being conveyed across to New Spain before they arrived. The expedition finally struck out into the Pacific in September of 1745, the season far advanced. Once at sea the ships encountered increasingly heavy storms and monsoons, until they were overwhelmed and became separated. One by one the damaged ships limped back into Batavia, unable to go any further.

A second attempt was made the following summer, with the cargoes transferred into the 50-gun Hervatting and 32-gun Hersteller. The two East Indiamen were manned by a crew of 400, who set sail from Batavia on 1 July 1746. By now the Spaniards had recovered from their previous dismay, and a few days later the 44-gun Pilar and the new 70-gun Nuestra Señora del Rosario left Manila, carrying a double cargo of goods - plus a secret warning to the Viceroy of New Spain, revealing the Dutch plot.

The Hervatting and Hersteller were struck by a heavy storm on August 2nd which lasted until the 8th, during which they became separated, but later they found each other. A second storm descended on them on September 5th near the Mariana Islands, and although it blew itself out the next day, they were unable to catch sight of one another again. Each sailed on for the Americas alone, while scurvy appeared amongst its crew.

On the afternoon of 26 October 1746, the Hervatting’s lookouts spotted the faint blue streak of California’s coast, and next day began sailing down it. Landings were made to search for food and water amongst the arid cliffs; the Indians proved poor but friendly. Less than two weeks later, the ship saw a canoe putting off from the tip of Baja California to meet them. This was the Jesuit missionary from San José del Cabo, greeting what he believed to be the Manila galleon. On discovering his error he nevertheless came aboard and was well received. He was Father Segismundo Taraval, a Czech, who could communicate with the Dutch through a Spanish-speaking Irish priest they had brought along.

Surprised by the Dutchmen’s arrival, the Jesuit returned ashore and advised his colleague at the neighbouring mission of Santiago, Father Karl Neumayer, a German. Both men knew the Spanish Crown forbade foreign contacts, but hoped to deal with the East Indiamen anyway. Their newly-established missions were short on provisions, and the crops had been consumed by locusts. The two Jesuits exchanged positions, so Neumayer could deal directly with the Dutch. When Taraval quit San José del Cabo, he took the cattle and young women inland with him, just in case. A warning was also sent to Father Johann Bischoff at La Paz, the next mission north, telling him of this unexpected development. He in turn advised the Jesuit at La Pasión, who relayed a warning to Magdalena Bay to watch for the real Manila galleon, as well as to the tiny provincial capital of Loreto.

However, the Hervatting was not a threat. Thirty-one of her crew members had died during the crossing, and many others were sick. When she anchored before San José del Cabo on 7 November 1746, the ten-man Spanish garrison was in no danger; quite the contrary. One of the first boatloads of Dutchmen that headed ashore the next morning overturned, and all aboard were lost. The only body recovered was that of its commander Lieutenant Taal, which washed ashore two days later - without its head. An ominous beginning to the Mexico visit.

Father Neumayer, though, received them warmly. The weary sailors were allowed ashore and entertained at the mission. The two sides bartered, the Dutchmen providing rice, wheat, liquor, oil, vinegar and candles in exchange for fresh meat. The Dutchmen were polite, doffing their hats to the missionary, Spanish soldiers, or when passing the chapel door. Most were Protestants, but one who was a German Catholic deserted and fled to Santiago, taking refuge in the church. Taraval sent him back under armed guard.

But although the missionaries were hospitable, the reception would be distinctly less friendly on the mainland. While the Hervatting lay at San José del Cabo, her consort the Hersteller glided past unseen out at sea. She made her landfall at the uninhabited Islas Marias off the coast, and on 3 January 1747 put into Manzanillo Bay and began firing a signal-gun, to find her lost sister. Instead, the concussive thuds alarmed the surrounding countryside.

When the Spaniards crept down to the shoreline for a peek, they discovered a large foreign vessel anchored off their coast. This was precisely the area where Anson had waited for the Manila galleon five years before, when the local militia had been powerless to intervene. This time they were determined to do better. The Spanish were also skittish because no galleon had arrived from the Philippines the previous year; seeing this menacing intruder, they now expected the worst.

Incredibly, the Hersteller’s signals seemed to work, for a sail rose over the horizon a few days later. As the East Indiaman stood out to greet her, though, a second
vessel appeared astern of the first. Instead of the 
Hervatting, the Hersteller had blundered into the path 
of the Rosario and Pilar, completing their own Pacific 
crossing. The two Spanish treasure ships were alarmed 
to find an unknown vessel in their path, and quickly beat 
to arms. The Hersteller sheered off after coming quite 
close, leaving the Spaniards to hasten down to Acapulco 
with a report of this encounter.

The two galleons arrived on January 10th and sent a 
courier inland to Mexico City with the Philippine dis-
patches. Amongst these was an anonymous letter from 
Macao, warning the authorities that the Dutch planned 
to infiltrate the Mexican market. The Viceroy was 
particularly angry to hear he was to be bribed with 
300,000 pesos. Don Francisco de Güemes y Horcasitas, 
Conde de Revillagigedo, was a tough but honest soldier, 
who had recently taken office after serving as Governor 
of Havana. Upon reaching Mexico, he had found the 
viceregal finances a shambles, and set about imple-
menting reforms. Expenditures were reduced, taxes 
raised, corruption rooted out. It was now galling to find 
himself being named as a likely candidate for a bribe.

Furiously he sent out orders directing the coast be 
closed to the Dutch; the ban against foreign traders was 
to be vigorously enforced. It was at this untimely 
juncture that the Hervatting left San José del Cabo and 
presented herself at the mainland port of Matanchel on 
15 January 1747. Unaware of the uproar caused by the 
Hersteller’s sighting and the Viceroy’s wrath, she set a 
messeger ashore with letters of introduction from the 
missionaries. These were to be carried to the capital by 
a retired soldier called Juan Nicolás de Estrada and 
presented to the Jesuit procurador, who was to use his 
influence on the Dutchmen’s behalf.

This unfortunate got no further than Guadalajara 
before he was arrested and his papers seized. Sent on to 
Mexico City under guard, he was tortured to get him to 
reveal the interlopers’ true design. In the meantime the 
Hervatting was kept under strict observation at 
Matanchel, and her crew prevented from landing. Un-
known to them, the Hersteller was also lying incommuni-
cado further to the southeast at Melaque.

On March 1st, after fruitlessly requesting permission 
to take on fresh water and wood, the Hervatting weighed 
anchor and stood out of Matanchel for the Islas Marias 
off the coast. While there, her consort the Hersteller left 
Melaque for San Telmo; some 28 of her crewmen were 
taken prisoner while attempting to come ashore. The 
Hervatting returned to Matanchel on the 9th, having 
replenished her supplies as best she could. An anony-
mous note from onshore informed the crew that her 
sister ship was about 100 miles away, “in desperate need 
of help, its crew nearly all dead.” Their own plight 
became increasingly desperate.

A landing party was cut off at Matanchel by Spanish 
cavalrymen on the 12th, and seven crew members were 
captured. The Hervatting sent a complaint ashore, de-
manding the return of the prisoners and threatening 
reprisals if they were not allowed to replenish their 
supplies for the long voyage back to Batavia. The 
Spanish replied with the usual silence. On the night of 
March 16-17, the Dutch set a raiding party ashore, but 
the Spaniards were waiting in ambush. A skirmish 
ensued, in which four of the Hervatting’s crewmen and 
one Spaniard were killed. Fifteen Dutchmen were taken 
captive, and they were the lucky ones. The rest were 
driven back aboard ship, and that same morning the East 
Indiaman sailed.

Without fresh provisions, the vessels could not hope 
to recross the Pacific Ocean. Their crew would slowly 
die of scurvy, thirst and hunger as the ships forged 
along. The evening of March 25th an unidentified sail 
was spotted outside Acapulco, and next morning drew 
nearer. At 11:00 a.m. she launched a boat, which 
approached the harbour mouth but then put about, and 
returned to the ship without speaking to anyone ashore. 
It is believed this was the Hersteller, the last time she 
was ever seen. Neither she nor the Hervatting were 
heard from again.

By early April the Spanish treasure ships were ready 
to depart, but their commander hesitated. With millions 
of pesos aboard, he was afraid to put to sea until the 
Dutchmen were accounted for. The Viceroy ordered 
him to sail on 8 April 1747; there was nothing to fear, 
Revillagigedo said, from esos navlos de muertos - those 
dead men’s ships.

SOURCES

Volume 8 of the Marina Collection in the Mexican national 
archives is entirely given over to the repulse of the Hervatting 
and Hersteller, while Exp. 7, folios 167-200 of Volume 21 
contains a dozen letters from Dutch prisoners. More material 
is to be found in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, 
which Peter Gerhard used for his article “A Dutch Trade 
Mission to New Spain, 1746-1747” (Pacific Historical Re-
view, Volume XXIII, No. 3, August 1954, pp. 221-226).