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## The Recovery of the San Diego

Jose M. Buhain

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## The Recovery of the *San Diego*

Jose M. Buhain



The naval battle between the Spanish and the Dutch on 14 December 1600, which resulted in the sinking of the *San Diego*, the former's warship discovered recently off the coast of Nasugbu, Batangas, was recorded for posterity by both sides of the conflict, although their accounts were, as to be expected, a bit conflicting. Jesuit historian Fr. Horacio de la Costa included these in his chronological selection of historical records, *Readings in Philippine History*, annotating that the Dutch version "of the same battle shows how different a fight can look when viewed from the opposite side" (De la Costa 1965, 49).

One of the accounts was taken from *Sucesos de las islas Filipinas* of Antonio de Morga, lieutenant general and senior member of the Royal Audiencia of Manila who himself commanded two warships and three small boats dispatched, in the words of De la Costa, "to uncork the bottle" two Dutch ships formed to isolate the Spaniards in Manila; the other was taken from Da Constantin's *Recueil des voyages*.

But to better savor each narration of that historic sea confrontation, let us first recapitulate the events that led up to and came after it.

Strangely enough, it arose from what today's journalists would dub the "Spice War" or, to use an alliteration, the "Condiment Conflict," for it all began with the urge to satisfy that culinary craving for piquancy in food. Actually the Spaniards and the Dutch should not have been quarreling, for they were then under just one ruler. The king of Spain, Philip II, had inherited the Netherlands from his father, Charles V. But having renounced their Catholic faith, the Dutch wanted to withdraw their allegiance to the Catholic monarch (De la Costa 1965, 49). Thus, as early as 1598, a decade after Spain lost its naval supremacy to England, the Dutch had sought their independence from the Spanish crown. But it was only in 1609, nine years after that historic sea battle off Nasugbu, that Spain recognized it (Casal 1993). Hence they were still fighting for it when the encounter occurred.

Philip, of course, would not take such an affront from his "rebellious subjects." When the Spanish king acquired Portugal, he punished the Dutch by closing Lisbon to their ships. "This was a shrewd blow," wrote De la Costa (1965, 49), "for the Dutch were making a good thing out of buying spices in bulk at Lisbon and retailing them in the Northern countries." This forced the Dutch merchants to get them from the Spice Islands (the Moluccas) themselves. Thus, in 1598, they "sent 22 ships in five separate expeditions to the East Indies." One such expedition was commanded by Oliver Van Noort, head of a free trade enterprise who had been commissioned as admiral by Count Maurice of Nassau, governor of the United Provinces (Netherlands) and later Prince of Orange (Casal 1993).

Van Noort left Rotterdam with a convoy of four large vessels and a small one with about 250 men of varied nationalities on board, "ostensibly on a mission of trade." However, by the time he reached the Philippines in October 1600, he had lost three of the ships and about a hundred of his men. His remaining two vessels—the *Mauritius*, his flagship, and the *Concord*—sailed through San Bernardino Strait and landed in Albay for fresh water and supplies. News about this, wrote historian Carlos Quirino, reached Governor General Francisco de Tello who immediately had the defenses of the Cavite arsenal strengthened and the armed vessels being built or repaired there completed "to repel the hated enemy" (Quirino 1978, 1101).

### **The Recovery of the *San Diego***

One of the ships being reconditioned in Cavite was the galleon *San Antonio* which was built in Cebu. It was renamed *San Diego*. Weighing from 200 to 500 tons, it was 35 to 40 meters long and about 20 meters wide. It would seem that it was being repaired not for war but for trade, judging from the 34,407 items recently retrieved from its wreck (Casal 1993).

That it was hastily converted into a warship could be gleaned from the vessel's heavy provisions—over 750 jars, some still bearing remains of foodstuff when recovered—and the varied cannons found in it: of its 14 cannons, no two are of the same size and shape—"like a 1600 artillery catalogue!" said Fr. Gabriel Casal, National Museum director, in a lecture on the subject on 18 September 1993. "There are 436 intact Chinese porcelain pieces, 51 damaged but complete, and 242 restorable. Similarly, there are 327 intact stoneware

vessels, 106 damaged but complete, and 171 restorable, and 78 intact earthenware items, 14 complete, and 22 restorable. Not to mention all the broken items, fragments and sherds," Casal reported.

Also retrieved, according to the Museum Director were a sixteenth-century astrolabe, which he said "is among the four oldest existing from that period and the most intact," a mariner's compass still with the glass, needle and compass cord, three helmets, 31 sword fragments, 66 locket, 139 coins, 104 buckles, buttons, a few gold ornaments, 197 cannon balls, musket balls and other implements. For a battleship, the vessel was rather luxurious. It had porcelain from the port of Swatow in Southern China, "reserved for persons of high rank," porcelain from Jiondezana, enamel pots, Spanish glasses and "glasses of an indecent luxury, the glasses of Murano, which were reserved for the great of the courts of Europe" ("The Fabulous Bounty of the San Diego," *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, 23 May 1993, pp. 4-6, hereinafter referred to as "The Fabulous Bounty. . .")

All these items were recovered from the wreckage of the *San Diego* sunken 52 meters deep, buried in thick debris, approximately 900 meters northeast of Fortune Island, by a marine archaeological team under the supervision and control of the National Museum (Fernandez 1993, 11).

It was a Paris-based adventurer, Frank Goddio, "a rich businessman who has a bizarre sense of humor: that of loving history for history's sake and archaeology for archaeology's sake," who broached the idea of looking for the remains of the *San Diego* to the National Museum ("The Fabulous Bounty. . .") This shipwreck hunter, who discovered the first Chinese junk of the Ming Dynasty ever recovered and another of the twelfth century Sung Dynasty, and underwrote missions to discover other ships in other countries before, had spent three years researching in the archives of Seville, Madrid, Amsterdam and the Vatican.

Although descriptions of the *San Diego's* location were nowhere near where it was actually found—Morga said it sank 7.245 kilometers from Fortune Island while Tello placed it at 9.66 kilometers away from there (Casal 1993)—Goddio decided in May 1991 that he knew where to look. Having pinpointed the location of the sunken *San Diego*, Goddio submitted a proposal to the National Museum which had been undertaking marine archaeological projects in the past few years. Given the go-signal, he approached the Elf Foundation, a French petroleum conglomerate, for financial help, which he got.

With \$2.9 million, he organized his team of searchers: fourteen professional divers and a physician. Joined by three experts from the National Museum, the team began the search in February 1992 in a zone established to be 2.7 kilometers long and 1.8 kilometers wide. The team excavated this area longitudinally for three weeks ("The Fabulous Bounty. . ."). "Research for the project was done aboard the *Kamilon*, a twenty-meter long *catamaran* that carried two tons of recording equipment. For the first time, the team engineers used a proton magnetometer of multiple resonance," reported the cover story of *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, 23 May 1993 issue ("The Fabulous Bounty. . .")

### The *San Diego* Treasure

Aside from the human divers, small submarines and robots were used, making it "the number one project in the world today," according to Kistoff Emory of the *National Geographic*. "Everyday, since the start of the expedition, divers would spend about an hour at the bottom to recover the artifacts," wrote Isabel Fernandez (1993) of *Makati Village Voice*. "On February 12, three days after the first dive, the searchers came up bearing two Spanish jars. . . . When the expedition was over, the jars numbered 4,090, all of them intact, of Chinese, Burman, Philippine or Spanish origin. Some of them still contained hazel nuts, coconuts, other food," reported the *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*.

After 600 dives in less than three months, a total of 34,407 items were recovered, each one appropriately labelled, numbered and listed in a registry. "It is the most fabulous underwater treasure of all time," exulted the magazine *Figaro* which considers the astrolabe the search yielded as "one of the five (four according to Casal) oldest and very certainly the most beautiful ever seen." ("The Fabulous Bounty. . .")

But what intrigued Casal most from what could be gathered from the items recovered was why the ship carried so many passengers, not a few of them noblemen, "the fine flower of the Spanish aristocracy in the Philippines," according to *Figaro*. And, judging from some of the human bones found in it, some of them were even women (Casal 1993). It would seem that the galleon was scheduled to sail for Mexico with all its cargo and that it was hurriedly armed with cannons simply to drive away the Dutch intruders so it could proceed with its journey.

## The Battle

According to Casal, it was only on 1 December 1600, thirteen days before the actual encounter, that Tello officially ordered the preparation of armed ships in Cavite to pursue the enemy vessels that docked in Albay. In compliance with the order, inland fortifications were dismantled to provide the *San Diego* and another ship, the *San Bartolome*, cannons and ammunition (Quirino 1978, 1101). Even before Van Noort landed in Albay, Tello had whipped up a naval force to repel incursions not only by the *moros* of Mindanao but also by British and Dutch marauders. To command that force he had appointed an old hand in the game, Juan de Ronquillo.

However, Morga opposed the appointment. Ambitious and wishing "to make a name for himself," the lieutenant general persuaded Tello to appoint him instead. Hence, on 1 September 1600, more than a month before the *Mauritius* and the *Concord* were spotted in Albay, he took over the command, although he lacked the qualifications to assume it. Morga's sole military experience was when he commanded 200 soldiers who sailed on board with him from Acapulco to reinforce the Spanish garrisons in the Philippines in 1595. A holder of doctorates in canon and civil law, he managed to be appointed senior judge and later lieutenant general and senior member of the Royal Audiencia in Manila (Cummins 1978, 1094).

In fact, it was his having led the force to repulse Van Noort that prompted an official inquiry in Manila. Letters of complaint against Morga's ineptitude were sent to the king of Spain. Commenting on that naval debacle, Wenceslao Retana, Morga's historian, wrote: "This catastrophic event was the natural consequence of entrusting the command of a naval battle to a jurist." But Morga was a real doer. "In 30 days," wrote Quirino, "he reported to Tello that the Cavite navy yard had been fortified with a dozen medium-sized bronze cannons set up at strategic points, trenches had been dug and soldiers trained to meet any attack."

By October, work on the *San Diego* had been finished. Eleven additional cannons were mounted on it. A small vessel, the *San Bartolome*, was likewise reinforced with artillery. But while arming the two ships proved an easy task for Morga, manning them posed some problems. "When professional soldiers showed their disinclination to embark on the two galleons," Quirino relates, "Morga called for volunteers and adventurers in the city to join, offering them attractive pay aside from a share in the booty from enemy ships." Two

months later, on 12 December, a Tuesday, the *San Diego* and the *San Bartolome* were able to leave Cavite with more than 300 (500 according to Casal) seamen and soldiers on board to comply with the order of Tello, "to seek, pursue and destroy the enemy (Quirino 1978, 1102).

The "enemy" had by that time "cruised around Corregidor Island to waylay any ships that might be passing through." This had to be done since the Spaniards in the Philippines were tasked by Philip II to defend and police the Spice Islands, despite the fact that the spice trade was in the hands of the Portuguese, all for reason of Manila's propinquity to the Moluccas (De la Costa 1965, 49).

So the *San Diego*, with Morga on board, the *San Bartolome*, a *galibrazza* commanded by an experienced naval officer and close associate of Ronquillo, Captain Juan de Alcega, two *caracoas*, (small service vessels) and one *barangay* boat sought out the enemy.

This was how Casal described the confrontation: "At daybreak of the 14th of December, the two Spanish vessels found the Dutch ships anchored near Friar's Point. Upon seeing the Spanish fleet coming, the Dutch weighed anchor, raised their flags on their topsails and prepared to approach. Instead of meeting the Dutch, Morga could have dropped two anchors from the *San Diego* (these were not recovered at the site of the shipwreck), and waited for the Dutch to attack. "The Dutch fired the first shot to find the range. Hence, the battle must have started from Friar's Point, passing through Fuego Point, to Fortune Island, in-between Nasugbu, where the actual wreckage of the *San Diego* was discovered, and continued on to Lubang Island where the *Concord* was captured by the *San Bartolome*" (Casal 1993).

This was what happened afterwards, according to Morga (1868), as translated by E.J. Stanley: After an exchange of volleys the *San Diego* and the *Mauritius*, the former closed in on the latter "and grappled with (it) on the portside, sweeping and clearing (its) decks of the men that stood upon them, and threw upon them a banner and thirty soldiers and a few sailors who took possession of poop, castle and cabin and captured their colors at the gaff and poop and the standard which floated at the stern." Outmanned, Van Noort, with what remained of his men "retreated in the bows below the harpings" and sent one of his crew "to ask the auditor (Morga, the *oidor*) for terms," of surrender. But it seems that Van Noort realized later that he was "with a better ship and artillery." Thus he "did not wait any longer for the answer to the terms which he had at first asked for and began to fight again with musketry and artillery."

What followed was a long bloody battle. "The combat was so obstinate and heavily fought by both sides that it lasted more than six hours between the two flagships, with many killed on both sides. But the corsair (Van Noort) had the worst of it all the time, for of all his men there did not remain alive more than fifteen, and those much damaged and knocked to pieces." In the end, Van Noort's ship caught fire, the flames rising high "by the mizzenmast and part of the poop." Seeing this, Morga ordered his men to abandon the Dutch vessel. He cut the rope holding his ship to the burning boat and moved away from it so as "not to risk his own ship." But alas! as he sailed away from the Dutch craft, he "found that his ship, from the force of the artillery during the long fight, had a large opening in the bows and was making so much water that she could not overcome the leak and was going down." The corsair "made haste with its few remaining men to put out the fire on board his ship, and having quenched it took to flight." As for the *San Diego*, it "went down in so very short a time" that the crew could not even "provide themselves with anything which could save them." But Morga managed to get "the flag of the poop and the standard of the enemy which he carried about him" before he swam for four hours, reaching "land at an uninhabited island two leagues from there, very small, named Fortuna."

### The Dutch Version

This, of course, was not the way the other side saw it. From Da Constantin's account (1716, 11, 32v), it was the Spaniards who were on the losing end of that sea fight. Here is how Da Constantin related it: "The morning of the 14th December . . . they saw two sails come out of the straits of Manila. They took them at first for frigates, but as they approached it was seen they were large ships and it was known that they came to challenge."

After a trade of broadsides, the *San Diego* approached the *Mauritius* "and part of his (Morga's) crew sprang on board her (the latter ship) with a furious mien, carrying shields and gilded helmets and all sorts of armor; they shouted frightfully, 'Amayna, perros, amayna,' that is to say, 'Strike, dogs, strike your sail and flag.'" Outnumbered "seven or eight to one," the Dutch saw fit to go below deck, presumably as a ruse to surprise the attackers. True enough, "the Spaniards thought they were already masters of the ship." But when Van



Noort's men pounced upon them, "they saw themselves ill treated with blows of pikes and musketry that their fury was not long in slacking." What Morga failed to mention in his account was that the battling warships were securely tethered to each other because the *San Diego's* anchor "was fast in the cordage before the mast" of Van Noort's craft. In fact, it tore the deck of the Dutch ship in several places, leaving "the Dutch crew much exposed." As this happened, "the Spaniards frequently discharged their broadsides at them (the Dutch), and the others did not fail to answer them." Seeing that many of them had been wounded, Van Noort's men slackened their fire. This angered the Dutch commander. He promptly "went below the deck and threatened his crew" with blowing up the ship should they "not fight with redoubled ardour." Thus threatened, his men regained courage and "there were even some wounded who got up and returned to the fight." At this point, the *San Diego* sailed away, "and a little while after, (it) was seen to sink." Seeing themselves out of danger, the Dutch "began to repair damages, passing amongst many of their enemies who were still swimming and whose heads, which appeared above water, they pushed under whenever they could reach them." As for the casualty on the Dutch side, only seven were recorded dead by Da Constantin. A total of forty-eight men of Van Noort survived, according to his version of that naval engagement.

Based on the two conflicting accounts and other sources, Quirino and Casal pieced together what to them actually happened in that battle. According to Quirino, Van Noort had no intention of clashing with the Spaniards. The historian wrote: "Van Noort sent the captain of the auxiliary vessel, Lambert Biesman of the *Concord*, to investigate and he reported to Van Noort that the oncoming ships were men-of-war flying the flag of Castile. The Dutch flagship, the *Mauritius*, wanted to flee and gave orders to the *Concord* to evade a clash. Unfortunately, the flagship's anchor got stuck in the coral reef, and many agonizing minutes passed until Van Noort ordered the anchor chain broken." Caught in that predicament, Van Noort must have been forced to fight. "The *Mauritius* fired a salvo—and all shots found their mark," narrates Quirino. The *San Diego* returned the fire but missed completely. This was because many of the Spanish cannoneers had never fired a cannon in all their lives. According to Casal (1993), there are indications that the *San Diego* "managed to fire only one shot" and that, from a short cannon. "Due to its heavy load, the ship was low and its cannonports must have been below the waterline and could not be opened. It appears that only

arquebuses and muskets were used and not its artilleries," Casal surmised. This must have prompted Morga to decide "to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat." Casal said the *San Diego* had 500 men on board while the *Mauritius* had only around fifty. Hence "Morga was confident enough to get as close as possible to the Dutch."

This was what followed in the mind's eye of Quirino (1978, 1102). "Minutes later the two flagships were locked in mortal combat. It was eight o'clock in the morning of Thursday, December 14 of the last year of the 16th century. Lines with grappling hooks were thrown from the Spanish to the Dutch ship, and the fierce Spanish infantrymen, complete with armor breastplate and *morion* (visorless steel helmets) spilled on to the deck of the enemy ship like water over a dam. "Muera, perros!" the Spaniards shouted as they leapt aboard the Dutch flagship. The arquebuses and muskets of both sides had been fired just before the two vessels jarred side by side. Since it would take too long to reload them, the antagonists closed in on each other with hand weapons. Steel clanged against steel, punctuated by the guttural Dutch oaths and shrill Spanish imprecations. A dozen men on both sides fell mortally wounded on the deck made slippery with blood. With the weight of numbers the Spaniards pushed the Dutch into the prow and gained control of the poop and center part of the ship. At the prow, through narrow doorways, the Dutch lessened the numerical odds against them because only a limited few could wield their weapons in such a crowded space. Prior to the engagement, Van Noort had thoughtfully battened down the hatches and other means of entrance to the decks below, and soon Spaniards above milled around in the belief that they had won the battle, since enemy resistance had abated. The attackers lowered the Dutch flag and hacked vainly at doors and hatches. In about an hour, the *San Bartolome* hove into range and let loose a salvo of cannon fire against the *Mauritius*. The Spaniards on deck shouted across the intervening water: 'Cease firing—don't kill us! The ship is already ours. Victory, victory for the King of Spain!' Hearing this, Captain de Alcega sailed away to chase the *Concord* which had steered southwest in the direction of Lubang Island. The two *caracoa* full of natives also came to help "but a warning shot from the Spanish flagship kept them at a respectable distance." Obviously, Quirino inferred, "the Spaniards did not want anybody to share the glory of the enemy flagship's capture."

It was at this stage that Van Noort "hit upon an old seafaring trick." He ordered his men to build a small fire below and create a lot of smoke to make the Spaniards think the *Mauritius* was

burning, and thus decide to abandon it. True enough, Morga ordered his men to return to the *San Diego* thinking the Dutch ship was really on fire. But when the Spaniards transferred to their vessel, it began to list slowly "because it had received several cannon shots through its side near the water line.

Panic seized Morga's men. This prompted Fr. Diego de Santiago, a Jesuit on board, to exhort his countrymen not to lose heart: "... die, but die as good soldiers of Jesus Christ—and not as food for the sharks. Of the two evils that face you, the lesser evil is to enter the enemy's ship. If a ship we must lose, let us a ship gain!" His exhortation fell on deaf ears. Some of Morga's men jumped over to the Dutch ship but most of them decided to remain, "partly because they believed the *Mauritius* was on fire and would eventually explode when the flames reached the powder magazine, and partly because their pilot had gone around saying he could save all their lives by beaching the vessel on Fortune Island, which was only a league away."

Seeing smoke still billowing from the *Mauritius*, the Spaniards cut the lines that bound their vessel to it "and forgot completely to disable the rigging of the enemy flagship." Minutes and a hundred yards later, the *San Diego* began to take in water "at a dangerous rate." "Those caught in the hold were drowned," Quirino narrates, "while those in the lower deck hurled themselves through the gun ports. Up above, soldiers hurriedly unfastened their armor, while those who failed to do so plummeted into the deep like so many pieces of stone. Then the vessel sank."

Quoting from a book written by Abellin, a German historian, which was published in Frankfurt in 1655, Quirino continues: "As they (the Dutch) were now relieved from the enemy and the ship had been put in order as much as possible, they sailed through Spanish survivors swimming in the sea. They killed some of them with their lances and shot at them with their heavy artillery. Among the survivors they recognized a monk."

### The Aftermath

Van Noort had five dead Spaniards on his ship thrown overboard. Also found by the Dutch was a small silver box which contained "a few small pieces of paper full of exorcism against the devil so that they would be safe and protected." "On that fateful day," Quirino goes on, "the Spaniards lost 137 of the 200-odd men on the flagship,

including the friars and the two Jesuits. The *Mauritius* lost at least five crew members." Eight months later, on 26 August 1601, Van Noort landed in Rotterdam, the second commander to circumnavigate the world, the first being Sebastian del Cano, the tough Basque who took over Magellan's command after the latter was killed in Mactan in 1521.

As for the *Concord*, which was commanded by captain Lambert Biesman, it was pursued by the *San Bartolome* which caught up with it and, after a brief fight, subdued it near Lubang Island. Captured with Biesman were twenty-five of his men, twelve of whom were to be garrotted in public later. The rest were spared, ostensibly after embracing the Catholic faith, but Captain Biesman, related a Spanish friar, "refused to be converted, and he was the most stubborn dog of a heretic I have ever seen in my life."

As for the *San Diego*, Casal (1993) theorized that "Blown by a northeasterly wind, it reached the northeast side of Fortuna Island where it sank" to afford us a priceless chance to see for ourselves what they had in currency, jewelry, tableware, battle gear, navigational tools, and others, almost four centuries ago.

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