

# The Dutch military presence in New Netherlands

By Lee Offen



In New Netherlands there were two distinct military organizations, one comprised of hired professionals and the other of armed citizens.

The army, which was hired by the Dutch West Indies Company (WIC) but paid for by the Dutch Government, consisted of volunteers drawn from Holland as well as New Netherlands. The tour of duty lasted one year, so it was an ideal means for those who wanted to leave Holland to get to New Netherlands and for those already in New Netherlands to have a job for at least a year. The army units in New Netherlands were stationed in small numbers at several different locations throughout the colony (see Table 2. Garrisons.). A civil proprietor employed by the WIC called a "*comis*," who was also in charge of the Company traders, would have commanded the Army detachments in the forts. This military organization was likely to have a high percentage of foreigners.

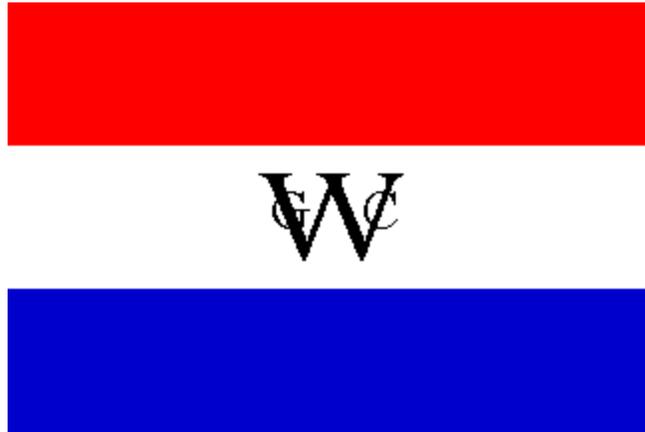
The Burgher Guard, referred to as the *schutterei*, consisted of all adult males who could afford to pay the fee to become a burgher in a community of sufficient size to support this military organization. The burgher fees were relatively high, 50 Guilders for the greater *burgerecht* and 20 Guilders for the lesser *burgerecht*. These high fees prevented a large number of non-Dutch from joining the Burgher Guard. The leadership of the Burgher Guard mirrored the hierarchy of the community with the upper tier of burghers assuming the role of officers i.e., Lieutenants, Ensigns, Cadets and the lesser burghers assuming the role of Sergeant, Corporal and Soldier. The only Burgher Guard in New Netherlands I have found record of was established in New Amsterdam on 9 May 1640. It was organized into two companies, the Orange and Blue Companies, with a third company being added in 1658.

The militia was present in the smaller communities and would have likely had a command structure based on the social hierarchy in the community. As there was no Burgher Guard in these smaller communities, there would be no fees to pay and so the militia would be comprised of the entire adult male population.

Both military organization would have been responsible for security of the settlement by providing a night watch as well as assisting the *schout*, the equivalent of a sheriff and prosecuting attorney in Dutch communities, in making arrests. The professional soldiers would have assumed responsibility for the security of the fort to which they were assigned and in which they resided.

The ranks structure of the militia, Burgher Guard and army would have likely been the same. I can find no evidence of a rank above Lieutenant in the literature and I think it safe to assume that Lieutenants would have commanded formations that approximated the size of companies (about 100 men). Ensigns would have served as the second in command of the formation and been responsible for the colors. I would assume that cadets were perhaps officers in training. The senior non-commissioned officer of a

company-sized formation would have been the Sergeant, with Corporals in charge of files comprised of perhaps five to ten soldiers



**Flag of the Dutch West Indies Company**

Since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch professional armies were comprised mostly of foreigners seeking to sell their services in the wars with Spain. By virtue of their mercenary status, these foreigners would be more inclined to do the bidding of their paymasters, the House of Orange, and so represented a potential threat to the freedoms of the Dutch people. The professional army was viewed as a necessary evil in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Society. Not so the Burger Guard and militia. The Dutch view of the homegrown, part time soldier was quite positive and to participate was seen as an adult male's civic duty and represented an expression of civic responsibility. The prevalent attitude about the two military institutions present in New Netherlands would in all likelihood be similar to the attitudes of the Dutch in the Netherlands.

The variety of equipment in the hands of the military organizations of New Netherlands would have been considerable for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons would have been the requirement for the armed civilians to provide their own longarms, swords and means of carrying powder and shot. The professional military force would have had a variety of equipment as well due to their deployment to the colony over time from a nation with no uniformity of equipment for its own forces. Each soldier deployed to New Netherlands was supplied with longarm, sword and either a bandoleer or cartridge box.

The technological change in firearm ignition systems would have had an impact over time on the types of longarms found in New Netherlands. In all likelihood there would have been a considerable number of matchlocks with some firelocks present. The way ammunition was being carried was transitioning from bandoleers to cartridge boxes on the European continent, so it is likely that both would have been seen in the professional as well as armed civilian military organizations.

There is no evidence that either the armed civilians or professional soldiers in New Netherlands wore uniforms, but there were chain mail coats requested for use in the early 1640's. Insignia of rank would have been worn with civilian clothes. It is likely that Officers and Sergeants with Officers carrying the Partizan and Sergeants the Halberd as symbols of military rank would have worn the tawny orange sash.

Swords would have been worn by most of the members of a military organization of the time and would have been of a quality appropriate to the social station of the wearer. There is no evidence that pike were present in New Netherlands.

**Table 1. Numbers of professional soldier in New Netherlands by year**

1633	40-50
1650	28
1659	127
1660	250

1662 130

**Table 2. Garrisons**

1614-1617 Fort Nassau  
1624 Fort Oranije (vicinity current Albany, NY)  
1624 Fort Nassau (Banks of the South or Delaware River)  
1624 Fort De Goede Hoop (banks of the Fresh or Connecticut River)  
1626 Fort Amsterdam (Nieu Amsterdam)  
1638 Fort Christina established by the Swedes on the Delaware River  
(vicinity current Wilmington, DE)  
1648 Fort Beversreede (banks of Schuylkill River)  
1651 Fort Beversreede dismantled  
Fort Nassau dismantled  
Fort Casimir built (vicinity current New Castle, Delaware)  
1654 Fort Casimir taken by Swedes and renamed Fort Trefaldighet  
1655 New Sweden falls  
Fort Christina renamed Fort Altena  
Fort Trefaldighet renamed Fort Casimir  
1656 Fort Casimir renamed New Amstel after transfer of control from WIC to City of Amsterdam 1664  
New Netherlands taken by England

**References:**

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Aimone, Alan and Barbara, *"New Netherlands Defends Itself"* Military Collector and Historian, Vol. XXXI1 No.2 Summer 1980

*"Documentary History of the State of New York"*

*"Charter of the Dutch West India Company 1621"*  
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/westind.htm>

**Recommended Reading:**

Merwick, Donna, *"Possessing Albany, 1630-1710"*

Rose, Peter G., *"The Sensible Cook"*

Geyl, Peter, *"History of the Dutch Speaking Peoples, 1555-1648"*

Geyl, Peter, *"Orange and Stuart, 1641-1672"*

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