

Notes for VOC ship *Arnhem* 1623

They sought the absence of land not lands to settle or conquer – they sought the rumoured passage between Cape York & Papua New Guinea as a short-cut to Europe.

- **April and May 1623** an expedition consisting of the ships the *Arnhem* and the *Pera* under the command of Jan Carstensz was sent to northern Australia to try to advance knowledge of the coast, mainly for commercial advantage. Carstensz orders were ‘concluding treaties of friendship with natives of Quey, Aru and Tanimber, and of further discovering and exploring the land of Nova Guinea...’.
- Carstensz was aboard the *Pera* and Dirk Melisz was master of the *Arnhem*.
- **11 February**, Dirk Melisz, the master of the *Arnhem*, went ashore with fifteen others (according to Carstensz without his knowledge or consent). On the beach they were surprised by a large group of Papuans. Nine people were killed and the others, amongst whom was the badly wounded skipper Melisz, made it back to the ship. Melisz died from his wounds and Willem Joosten Van Colster (or Coolsteerd) was appointed as the new master of the *Arnhem*.
- The coast along which the ships sailed was extremely tortuous and impossible to approach because of the mud and sandbanks. Often both ships – especially the *Arnhem* – ran aground.
- **4 March** Van Colster went aboard of the *Pera* and told Carstensz that his ship had nearly foundered. Numerous of seams and cracks had appeared, water had entered the hold and part of the powder and rice supplies were soaking wet. They decided to take down the main-topmast and to carry less sail to prevent strain on the ship.
- **22 March** the *Arnhem* ran adrift from her anchors and collided with the *Pera* and was badly damaged. Her rudder was irreparable damaged. However, using the main-topmast from the *Pera* and wood from the shore, the carpenters managed to construct a jury-rudder. The ships repeated Jansz’s 1606 route across the western entrance to the Torres Strait, where Willem Jansz had seen an opening. But Carstensz concluded that it was impossible to sail further east, because of the numerous sandbanks and reefs, and that the so-called opening could only be a shallow bay. He named it the ‘de Drooge Bocht’ (the Dry Bend).
- **12 April** they reached Cape York. Carstensz named the eastern coast of Cape York *Carpentier*. He described the York peninsula as being ‘flat; good pastures with few trees, with enough soil to plant and sow everything, but as far as we could see without any fresh water...’ Contacts with the inhabitants had been disappointing. They were very primitive and had nothing to offer for trade.
- Both ships continued past Jansz’s Cape Keerweer to the southern end of the Gulf of Carpentaria, but there had not been many opportunities to replenish the food, water and firewood supplies. They decided not to continue southward, but to turn around. The expedition halted at a river, which Carstensz named Staten River.

- **26 April** Carstensz planned to slowly retrace his steps, investigating the land and its inhabitants more closely.
- At this point Van Colster, whose *Arnhem* was in poor condition, decided that the intended long return route back up the coast of New Guinea was not in his best interests. **During the night of 27 April** the *Arnhem* sailed away from the *Pera*. Carstensz wrote in his journal: ‘for on purpose and with malice prepense she cut away from us against instructions and our resolution, and seems to have set her course for Aru (to have a good time over there), but we shall learn in time whether she has managed to reach it’.
- Van Colster sailed north-west in the hope getting back to Banda as soon as possible. This way he touched the west coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria. No record has been left of this leg of the *Arnhem*’s journey, but letters from the Governor-General and the Councillors to the Directors in Amsterdam, and the instruction for Gerrit Thomaszoon Pool in 1636 and Abel Tasman in 1644, show that Van Colster was the first to chart the west coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Van Colster thought his two sightings on the west coast were islands, which he named Arnhem and Van Speults Islands.
 - **Instructions for Pool**, 19 February, 1636: ‘Failing ulterior instructions, we desire you to sail as quickly as possible from Banda to Arnhem’s and Speultsland, situated between 9 and 13 degrees Southern Latitude, discovered 1623’.
 - **Instructions for Tasman**, 1644: ; ‘... but owing to the untimely separation the Yacht *Arnhem*, after discovering the large islands of Arnhem and Speults, returned to Amboina unsuccessfully enough...’.
- The *Arnhem* arrived in Banda on 15 May.
- The results of the expedition cannot have been very satisfactory to the Directors of the VOC. The land searched by Carstensz seemed of no value; it contained no minerals, no gold, no silver. It was infertile and unsuitable for growing spice. In spite of extensive explorations, Carstensz had not managed to find Willem Jansz’s passage (between Cape York and Guinea); on the contrary, his words suggested that there was no passage at all save for ‘*Drooge Bocht*’.

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