

# STATIA INVADED FROM SABA

## WAY BACK WHEN

- Glimpses of our islands' past -

By Statia-born Historian Walter Th. Hellebrand



In the middle of the night and with full assistance and support of the Saba Island Council, a ship with some 30 to 35 men on board set sail from Saba's rocky shores to St. Eustatius. It was the first stage of a plan that was designed to attack and conquer Statia and that the members of the Saba Council had helped to put together – even though they had launched an "Independent from Statia" revolt just over a year before. The date was July 25/26, 1690, and Saba was the only place in the Windward Islands where the Dutch flag was still flying.

### French jealousy

A little more than a year before, after the outbreak of the Nine Years War (1688-1697), the Count De Blénac, military commander of the French forces in the Americas, following direct orders from the self titled "Roi Soleil," King Louis XIV of France, had occupied Statia. In 1682 the Dutch West India Company (WIC) had taken over direct ownership of the island from the two "patrons" who had been leasing it before. The WIC invested in their new colony and even sent over tradesmen to serve the settlers – and a physician: Jan Simonsz Doncker. He was to play a conspicuous role in the island's history.

The WIC's policy paid off and led to the rise of the island as the commercial hub of the North-eastern Caribbean. The French could not keep up and even



The outlines of Statia and Saba on an English chart of 1775 (Walter Hellebrand Collection)

their own settlers had to rely on Statia to buy their sugar and sell them provisions. On top of everything, Statia was providing France's enemies, the English, with the supplies to wage war against them.

### Statia gets its second fort

Commander of the island at the time was Lucas Schorer (appointed in 1686). He came from an upper-class family in Middelburg, the second largest commercial centre in the Netherlands at the time, and was a member of the board of the WIC. He had probably opted himself to be sent out for a career on Statia. But the contrast between his life on silk cushions between gilded leather clad walls and the realities of a colony that had only started from scratch on a small island 50 years before must have been enormous. Little did he know then that he would end his years in poverty in Saba...

Schorer was aware of the international tension and since Statia was still only defended by Fort Oranje, he decided to build the island's second fortification: the Waterfort or Fort Amsterdam. As he did not consider Fort Oranje capable of sheltering the entire population

including slaves and cattle in case of an attack, he also started the construction of a fortified place of refuge on

Therefore, when reports arrived on April 2, 1689, that De Blénac was heading for Statia with 1,500 men, the

Nevertheless, Schorer was not going to give up and strengthened Fort Oranje with heavy beams and sand



Schorer's fortification on top of Gilboa Hill was disapproved by the Board of the WIC

top of Gilboa Hill. However, his fellow members of the board of the WIC did not allow him to finish this fortification.

next morning all women and children were taken on board two Dutch ships to be evacuated. However, before they finished getting them all on board, the French fleet appeared on the horizon so the two captains sailed off to St. Thomas, leaving 88 women and 137 children behind.

### Human shield

Schorer (who had earlier complained that his whole garrison consisted of only five men and one corporal) did not have the means to stop De Blénac's superior forces consisting of ships and men from Guadeloupe, Martinique and French St. Kitts. He assembled some 90 civilian volunteers (something along the lines of our present VKE), but when their captain and three of his men got killed trying to stop the French from landing at Tumbledown Dick, they fled in disarray.

He had 400 of the latter made and arranged on the walls of Fort Oranje, with openings for the guns in between them. After a siege of almost two days – during which the flag on the fort "was pierced off by more than 100 bullets" – De Blénac demanded surrender. If Schorer refused, he would attack the fort, using 30 of his prisoners as a human shield to be "massacred." He would then kill all the men, women and children inside the fort. This left Schorer no choice – especially since the French had meanwhile landed some canons that would reduce the improvised reinforcements of the fort's walls to pulp.

### Refugees on Nevis

Schorer and his officers were shipped off to Nevis with their families – after being robbed by De Blénac's men of everything of value. Even the guards ordered by De Blénac to protect them

participated in cleaning them out. All other inhabitants, including the English, Germans, Irish and Courlanders (Latvians) living on the island were sent along with them.

Some of the Statian deportees on Nevis went to Curaçao and others joined

their wives and children who had been taken to St. Thomas. However, Schorer and others learnt that Saba had managed to fight off the French, so he and his fellow refugees decided to move there. (St. Maarten was controlled by the French at the time).

### Saban revolt against Statia

Only a year before, the Sabans had revolted against Schorer, who as Commander of Statia was also in charge of Saba. They accused him and his council of neglecting Saba and keeping the bulk of the supplies that were sent over from the Netherlands on their own island, not giving Saba its due (sounds familiar?). They had declared themselves independent of the Council of St. Eustatius and had proclaimed their Vice-Commander Engel van Beverhoudt Commander of



The Waterfort (or Fort Amsterdam), Statia's second oldest building, is in urgent need of repair

**WALTER** *Continued from page 4*

Saba. Nevertheless, when Schorer landed on Saba he was accepted as Commander again.

Schorer together with the Island Council then devised a plan to re-conquer Statia. On July 24, a ship arrived from St. Thomas that could be used to transport a reconnaissance party. It was hired for the purpose. The WIC surgeon Jan Doncker had meanwhile advanced to the position of Captain of the Civic Guard and was put in charge of this expedition – with Joan Benners second in command. They had to land in Jenkins Bay and then return the ship to pick up Schorer and the rest of the Statians.

**Statia scorched**

Doncker's landing was successful and his men took the two guards that the French left at Jenkins Bay prisoner. They were sent to Schorer in the ship that returned to Saba according to the plan. They told Schorer that Fort Oranje was defended by 40 soldiers and 30 planters and that the French had dug a moat around the fort in which they had placed a double row of palisades and bags with nails. They had placed twenty-two canons in the fort and had provisions for 2 months. The remaining women and children they had transferred to St. Martin. The cisterns outside the fort were rendered unusable by throwing cadavers in them.

Schorer concluded that the French were serious about defending the island and that Doncker therefore

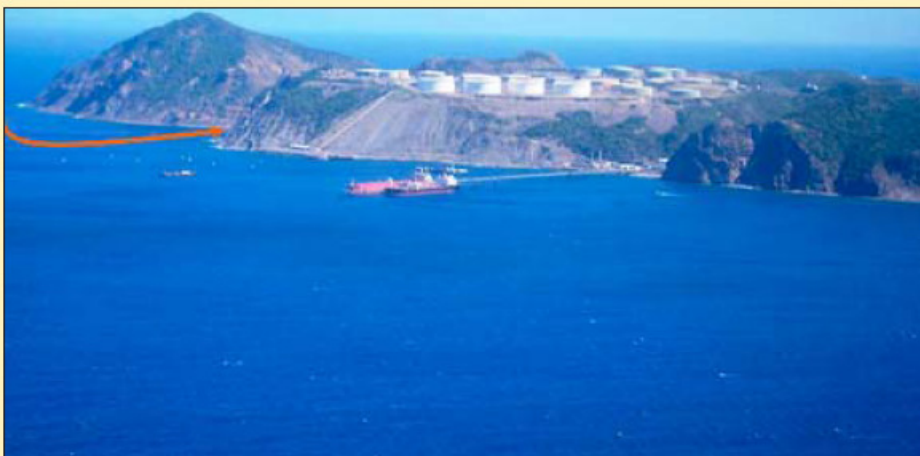
needed his immediate help. So he sailed over right away together with the remaining sixteen volunteers of his "liberation army."

In the meantime, Doncker's men had inspected the island. They did not find it in the same state as they had left it just over a year ago. The French had burnt the sugar cane, houses and sugar mills as well as the main settlement. Everything they could move out they took to Martinique, including slaves, merchandise and cattle. All in all, it left the French with booty worth 345,656 livres (about \$ 1.4 mln). They only left Fort Oranje intact and the church plus some small dwellings that they used for their own accommodation.

**Skirmish near Old Church Cemetery**

It was in one of the houses near to the church that a party of scouts sent out by Doncker was surprised by a French patrol. The Dutch managed to force the French to retreat to the fort with four wounded and leaving one dead behind while on Doncker's side there were only three injured. Their names betray the multinational nature of the Dutch settlements in the Caribbean: Hendrik Jansen (Dutch), Richard Hill (English) and F. Mercier (French). This church stood near the site of the present Old Church Cemetery at the top of Fort Oranje Straat, the second oldest monumental site on Statia.

Doncker made camp on the Oliviersberg which offered a good view of Fort Oranje (probably the western end of the so-called Horseshoe). Schorer was on his way there



The invasion party from Saba landed at Jenkins Bay

from Jenkins Bay when suddenly six English ships were spotted round the corner of Tumbledown Dick Bay. The next morning he found out that 350 men under the command of Thimotheus Thornhill had landed with the intention of demanding the surrender of the island.

Schorer and Doncker already had the French cornered inside the fort with their defeat only a matter of time so this new development was decidedly unwelcome. Schorer tried to beat the English to it by offering very attractive conditions of surrender to the French Commander, but to no avail.

**Statia's plain full of soldiers**

Statia's so-called "Cultivation Plain" now became the scene of a stand-off between three European super powers. Schorer with his troop of fewer than 50 men and

Thornhill with his 350 men both marched up to the fort defended by some 70 men under their French Commander. Thornhill made

were on the same side in this war!). He returned to Saba. Or in Thornhill's words: the Dutch "not having strength enough to take the fort, de-

to fire Schorer.

A letter sent to the Board of the WIC by "several" citizens of Statia earlier



In a house near the Old Church Cemetery, Dutch scouts killed one of their French attackers.

camp not far from Schorer's and requested a meeting. He proposed that they conquer the fort together and then share the booty. However, booty was not the motivation for Schorer and his men who had come to take back "their" island. So he declined the offer. Thornhill replied that Schorer would then never regain the fort. However, Schorer retorted that if he had not kept the French locked up in the fort, Thornhill would not have been able to land his troops in the first place.

**Commander declared insane**

It was a strange situation: the Dutch Commander of St. Eustatius & Saba having to reside on Saba because Statia was being occupied by their very own allies, the English. When the English first acknowledged this in 1693, nothing changed for Schorer as they put Johannes Salomonsz in charge of civil affairs on Statia, ignoring Schorer's title. When the commander of the English garrison on Statia, Major William Mussendine, at last received instructions for a full hand-over to the Dutch in 1696, it was Salomonsz who was chosen as the new Commander. One of the first things he did was

signed to get what plunder they could, and go off again" – a good example of "Trust thy neighbour as thyself" on Thornhill's part...

may have the explanation. It warns the Board that Schorer is "incapable and not in his right mind and has lost control of his senses." Salomonsz himself also paints a bad picture of Schorer in letters to their superiors in the Netherlands, accusing him of always being too drunk to look after his books. He describes him as a destitute cripple who had to be carried around by his slaves. There may have been rivalry because after Salomonsz' death, Schorer managed to get appointed as Vice-Commander of Saba. However, Schorer may indeed have looked for solace in liquor because Salomonsz' successor fires him again because of his drinking habit.

Photos by the author



The French were cornered inside Fort Oranje