

# Raising **GHOSTS** from a **WATERY GRAVE**

Photography by Sylvia Kreuger/Oceans Discovery

**T**iny, peaceful Tobago was once the scene of one of the bloodiest sea battles ever fought – one that saw 20 ships destroyed and sunk to the bottom of the sea. The year was 1677, and over 2,000 people, including 250 French and Dutch women and children and 300 African slaves, met horrific deaths in the waters of what is now Scarborough harbour – all in the fierce battle for control of Tobago.

We learned in history class that the island was called “Bellaforma” by Christopher Columbus when he came upon it in 1498, because it was so beautiful. We also learned that it came to be highly prized and changed hands more than 30 times as several European nations fought over the island.

But little is said or known about the human toll of these military dramas. This will soon change, when the incredible story of two gut-wrenching battles comes to light in a movie docudrama called *Tobago 1677*. The team behind the local production company Oceans Discovery Tobago Ltd, German filmmaker Rick Haupt and photographer Sylvia Kreuger, are architects of an ambitious, technically challenging movie that will raise the seventeenth-century ghosts from their watery grave and potentially put Tobago on the map for its unique archaeological heritage.

Over the past 25 years, Haupt and Kreuger have made several successful expeditions to document and recover underwater heritage. Through their company Oceans Discovery, the duo has produced many high-quality documentary series, including *Oceans of Mystery*, which aired on the Discovery Channel in over 112 countries.

Four centuries ago, Tobago was the scene of a bloody sea battle. Long forgotten, it's now being re-enacted for a TV docudrama. **Skye Hernandez** tells how this gripping tale resurfaced



Dutch battleships



Cannon at Fort King George



They first heard about the Tobago story in 2004, after a presentation on their work held in Jamaica. That year they had made a film documenting their search for the ships of Sir Henry Morgan, the notorious seventeenth-century Welsh privateer who was eventually knighted and became Lieutenant General of Jamaica. Their presentation was well received by leaders in the Caribbean tourism industry; but what they heard from Kevin Kenny, vice president of the Trinidad Hotel and Hospitality Association, made them want to find out more. Krueger recalls, "Kevin basically said, 'Listen, guys, we have a lot of shipwrecks in Tobago, too. Please come over and have a look.'"

What they found out, says Haupt, was that "unlike with Captain Morgan, where the story was known but no one knew where the shipwrecks were, in Tobago they knew about the shipwrecks but not the story."

And so started their own journey of discovery, one which would take six years of research into every aspect of the tragic battle, and a great deal of their own resources. They wanted to tell the whole story that emerged. It contained, says Krueger "all the elements of an epic Hollywood blockbuster – but is a real-life drama."

The story was played out at a time when the West Indies was a battleground for European nations bent on claiming territory and controlling



Bloody Bay location



the slave trade, which was enabling them to become wealthy world powers. The French king, Louis XIV, had been at war with Willem III of Oranje, King of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, since 1672. Louis was determined to break Dutch power and influence in the area and their control of the slave trade. He gave orders to recapture the territories of Cayenne and Marie Galante from the Dutch, destroy the Dutch fleet and so capture Tobago. The island was defended by a heavily-armed fort above Roodklyp Baai (now Scarborough Harbour), a sheltered bay whose entrance and wind patterns were unknown to the French.

The Dutch were led by Vice Admiral Jacob Binckes, an old enemy of the French commander, Vice Admiral Comte Jean D'Estrees. In their previous battle, Binckes had humiliated D'Estrees' forces; so, apart from carrying out his king's orders, the Frenchman had a personal vendetta against Binckes.

Knowing that the French were not confident about sailing into the harbour, Binckes believed they would attack on land, an idea further borne out by the Dutch scouts, who saw the French troops gathering on land and making preparations to attack. Most civilians, the Dutch as well as those French people who had elected to stay

under Dutch control – the aged, women, children and slaves – were put on supply ships and the Dutch warships anchored in front of them for protection.

The French did attack the fort. As a result, Admiral Binckes brought more cannons and soldiers from the ships to shore up the fort, leaving the harbour forces weakened.

## Vice Admiral Jacob Binckes believed the French would attack on land

The French, meanwhile, had captured a ship, whose captain they forced to guide them into the harbour. On March 3, 1677, the French attacked at sea. The soldiers and men at the fort had to watch helplessly as the furious battle took place below them and hear the screams of their loved ones as they perished. The French suffered heavy losses too, of ships and men, and limped away, a badly wounded, beaten force. However, they returned on December 12 to finish off the Dutch. This time they destroyed the fort with mortar firebombs. The blast from the third bomb killed most of the soldiers and officers, including Admiral Binckes.

Putting all this together in a film is a monumental task, as the filmmakers wanted everything to be accurate, "from the weaponry to belt buckles to the scarves around the actors' necks," says Krueger. "We went to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 2006 and spoke to seventeenth-century ship specialists and initially they didn't even know about this story, but we were able to get information about how ships looked at that time.

"We tried to do the same in France, but it was more difficult. In the beginning we didn't have the right contacts. Finally, through Alliance Française in Trinidad we got a great contact at the French Foreign Ministry, who began to dig around. He sent us all the info on the French side of the story."



*Sylvia Krueger taking location shots*



## The soldiers at the fort had to watch helplessly as the furious battle took place below them

But the film is just the beginning of the vision. There is a book in the works, and Haupt and Krueger hope to see the costumes from the movie used as the start of a living-history presentation. Perhaps one day, with the proper support, Scarborough Harbour could become a world heritage site. Krueger says Offshore Technologies in Trinidad, another sponsor of the project, is able to pinpoint where the ships are. "We'll find cannons, metal parts etc – all the wooden parts of the ships are long gone; what we'll find are mostly cannons lying at the seabed."

Haupt believes that once the story is out internationally, there will be more interest in Tobago and its history. "Universities abroad will be so keen to work with universities here, and the archaeological part will be very valuable. We believe there's a big future that can come from this film: create an archaeological scientific trust dealing with that part of the harbour, create an NGO to get funding, donate footage and research and get it into the education system."

The *Tobago 1677* project is being supported by the Tourism Development Company, Tobago House of Assembly, Trinidad & Tobago Film Company, Proman AG Switzerland, Proman AG Trinidad & Tobago, Caribbean Nitrogen Company Ltd and Nitrogen 2000, whose Tobagonian CEO Stephen Pollard took a keen interest. Additional support is coming from the T&T Coast Guard, the Cadet Force and Ministry of National Security.

"People didn't realise the number of organisations and people involved," says Krueger. "It has become a real community project."

And it will stay that way. Haupt adds, "We made sure to put 'Tobago' in the title to promote the island from the start. There is no mistaking that this is all about Tobago." ■

One of the most challenging parts of making the movie will be the high-quality animation needed, and for this they have as their partner a UK company, 422 South, which has worked on documentaries for Nat Geo and the BBC, as well as Brett Lewis of Eye Scream Animation in Trinidad.

Haupt says, "There are only a handful of people in this world who can animate historically accurate ships and their movements under battle conditions. We will bring those ships alive."

The cast, a total of about 90 people, will all be locals, even those who play the Dutch and French in the movie. Tobago's Signal Hill Choir will be involved and its director John Arnold is composing the music for the film. Tobago seamstresses are making the costumes, and project manager Richard Hadeed is also building the sets.

The 90-minute movie is being filmed in Quad HD on RED One cameras. Shooting will take place at Fort King George, Parlatuvier waterfalls, Bloody Bay and surrounding area and the Scarborough harbour, and is expected to start by March.



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