

# A day with the people of "Christmas at sea"

Since a long, long time, I have been in contact with the volunteers of "Kerstfeest op Zee" (Christmas at sea). Our manager Erik Hofmeester thought it would be a good idea to invite Mr and Mrs Gerard and Naomi De Goede, our contact persons at "Kerstfeest op Zee", for a visit to our offices in Terneuzen, to show them who we are and to provide them a nice day in Terneuzen.

Monique Haverbeke  
Crewing Assistant VSM B.V.

On 3 October 2013, we first talked about their charity work and their personal life over a cup of coffee. For lunch we went to a restaurant with view over the river Western Scheldt, where we discussed various matters on how the organisation of Kerstfeest op Zee works. They also talked about their connections with Japan and the trips they made to this beautiful, still not very known country. Mr De Goede reads and speaks Japanese and explained some of the characters to me and how names of cities can be translated/explained.

After our lunch it was time for "Het Portaal van Vlaanderen" (the Portal to Flanders), a permanent exhibition showing the working of the locks, connecting the Western Scheldt with the Ghent Terneuzen Canal.

They were impressed by the busy traffic on this canal and had no idea that so many vessels called Terneuzen and passed the canal to the port of Ghent.

Back in the office they met with Alasdair MacRae giving him the opportunity to thank them on behalf of our seafarers for their efforts to make Christmas at Sea something special. Chief Engineer Thomas van de Sande and Third Engineer Johan de Vos happened to also be in our offices so they could personally tell Mr and Mrs De Goede how much the gifts were appreciated on board.

Late in the afternoon Gerard and Naomi left after an enjoyable day, for all of us too!

## Christmas at sea

Christmas 1963. I was the Cargo Clerk on board MV Maron of the Royal Netherlands Steamship Company in Amsterdam. The vessel measured 3900 GRT, was about 100 meters long and 14 meters wide.

Naomi and Gerard de Goede

We were with a crew of 40 men. The vessel had a capacity for 12 passengers, who had their own dining room and saloon. When we had no passengers these rooms could be used for our Christmas celebration. On Christmas Day we were on our way from Kingston, Jamaica to Baltimore, Maryland, USA. Before departure from Amsterdam the Fourth Mate and I had already picked up the Christmas box from the ship owners' warehouse and stored in the Captain's cabin. Celebrations started around 10.00 a.m. with a speech from the Master and after that the 45 rpm record was played on the ship's record player. Fortunately the weather was good. Two times three minutes and

it was over. After that we all got a present; mine was a book. Back in my cabin I thought "What kind of people do care about us and make so much effort to give us a small present?" Who would have thought that 34 years later I was asked to take it over?

After seeing a TV program about Christmas at Sea I contacted them to ask for their bank account to make a donation. The chairman's wife called me back to tell me that instead of a donation they rather were looking for a successor for her husband, a former Captain. At that moment I was unemployed after the closing of the





Japanese Service Centre for ship machinery where I had worked for 25 years. My wife and I decided both to take the offer as she also wanted to do something for seafarers. In 1997 I started together with the chairman and from 1998 we took over. Our office was in a small room in the basement of the Seamen's house in the center of Rotterdam, along the river Maas. After our first year we noticed that a complete modernization of organization and of the presents was necessary. And so we did. The group consists of twelve people of whom three have been sailing in the past, five of them are the wives of former seamen, one lady has been working for a seamen's organization and the remaining three are friends.

At this moment the routing to get the presents on board is as follows:

End of March we receive the catalogues with the new collection of presents from our supplier and early April is the time our supplier visits us with some samples. We choose 30 or more presents to show to our staff. Soon thereafter we all come together in our house and check all the presents if useful on board, during flights or nice to take home. We also aim to choose one present that brings crew members together, such as chess games. We check with the ship owners how many ships with the number of crew members per vessel will be in their fleet

on Christmas day to make an estimate on the amount of presents.

The order is placed with the supplier and end July the presents are delivered to our office in Rotterdam. The packing of the gifts mainly starts the next day. After all the gifts are wrapped they are packed in boxes based on information of the ship owners. Before doing that, the owners are called for a final check. The boxes are packed in such a way that any damage to the contents is practically impossible. This is also done to keep the costs of transport as low as possible. My wife is doing a lot of work at home, such as preparing labeling, sets of envelopes with letters to the Masters. When a shipment is ready, we contact the Crew Managers to collect the boxes. If possible we deliver on board, which is always fun, like the time we delivered a box on board a very large container carrier, berthed in Rotterdam Maasvlakte, on Christmas Eve.

We do take into consideration the type of business of the shipping companies. The owners of heavy lift/cargo vessels, seagoing tugs or offshore activities get the boxes first; then the cargo liners with ships sailing mainly on very long distance. The last ones to get the boxes are those with ships sailing on short coastal routes.

It is a pity that government and local authorities have no longer an eye for the existence of seamen. This resulted in 2011 in the closing of the seamen's houses in Rotterdam, so we no longer had a place to work. At this time of despair my brother-in-law set up a new store, where we could use a large space, free of charge.

Where do we get the donations from? First of all the ship owners pay part of it, secondly we have private sponsors, some churches collect money during special Merchant Marine memorial services in Rotterdam and IJmuiden, and the Port Authority of Rotterdam supports us too. Two of our suppliers give us special discounts.

All-in-all it is a lot of work, and we, heading this group, celebrate Christmas the whole year round. And by the time the last financial matters have been settled, in April, our supplier calls us for an appointment to discuss the presents for the next Christmas.

After 16 years this has become a part of our daily life. Those who do the packing work already look forward to the next round. We all do this with much pleasure and a smile on the face of a seaman after having had a nice and warm Christmas celebration, is the best reward ever. And, of course, we are always on the lookout for feedback by e-mail. This may help us to improve the contents. Photos are also welcome; we use these for next year's calendar.