

Lt. L.M. Meyers
Opkomst Depot LSK
Recruiting Centre Neth. Air Forces
Ypenburg, Kamp B
Brasserskade, Delft

11 Jan. 1946

(to)
Mr. H.Th. de Booy,
Secretary/treasurer N.Z.H.R.M.
Heerengracht 545
Amsterdam

Referring to your letter dated 7-1-'46 it is an honour for me to inform you as follows. Indeed, on May 14, 1940, I sailed from Scheveningen to England with the motor life boat the "Zeemanshoop". The gentlemen Hack, Bongaerts and Dahmen had taken the initiative to do so, and I was aware of this when I went by bike around the Binnenhaven (Inner Harbour) of Scheveningen, intending to cross from there to England.

Mr. Hack, (at the time of this writing, Technical Officer at 320 Squadron) was at that time a student at the Technical University, and had - for his studies - made a trip to the Dutch East Indies as an apprentice engineer, and therefore understood that, in order to make the trip we intended to make, successfully, we needed a ship that was seaworthy and had sufficient supply of fuel on board. The gentlemen had started to consider fishing vessels, where huge amounts of money were offered in the negotiations with the fishermen. There was heavy bidding, but without much result. Moreover, we had nothing to offer when competing for a place on board, and we were not so much interested in reaching the other side just to save our lives, but to reach the other side to join the battle against the aggressor, which we had no opportunity to do until then in Holland.

Thus it was rather evident that the motor life boat the "Zeemanshoop" attracted the warm interest of Mr. Hack & Co. The question of the day at that moment was however "How to get a device like that running?" I can assure you that this was far from a simple matter.

I myself had no knowledge at all of engines, and I encountered Mr. Hack, who I had never met before, inside the engine room. He was very busy doing all kinds of things, and when he became aware of me, he asked if I knew anything about all this, but to my regret the only answer I could give him was that I had only studied one year of medical sciences.

He then became very impolite to me and asked me urgently to not touch anything anymore with my own fingers. From that moment on, I did not meddle in the propulsion organ anymore, apart from inhaling large clouds of petroleum vapour.

That the ship finally did get going is due to somebody who had started this contraption before and who supplied Mr. Hack with technical information.⁽¹⁾ After we had cast off the mooring lines because of the enormous interest which our experiments enjoyed and the large amount of people who had settled on our deck with the evident intention to join the trip, we later put this man at his request ashore in de Buitenhaven (Outer Harbour). We even had to ask a sergeant who had already conquered a place on board to fire a round over the heads of the interested people and other people present ashore in order to be

¹ The copy of the original letter shows a hand-written note: "The engine was started by the Scheveningen men J. Pronk and M. Rog."

able to loose the mooring ropes. The shots had the intended effect, people drew back on the quay, and we were thus able to limit the amount of people onboard that was already far too many anyhow, to 42 + 4 crew. (these numbers were only determined later during the trip and the keeping of a journal was omitted due to our ignorance with respect to nautical matters.) Once off-shore, the helm, which was already held by Jhr. M. de Jonge ², was left to him and he was asked to steer a N.W. course, this was in order to get as far away from the coast as possible. As England is situated somewhere in the West, this would not take us too far from the right direction. At app. 22.00 hrs, the engine started to show some problems. The rear cylinder was running warm, and Mr. Hack, who by now understood far more about the assembly of levers and valves, decided to almost fully close the throttle. The effect of this was that the distance from the coast seemed to become less instead of further, which caused some unrest among the passengers. In a council of war restricted to the four crew members we decided among ourselves to continue the journey, even if with one cylinder out of service and the other cylinder running at half power. Because I had learned to steer a bit on the holiday camps of the N.J.V. ³ I was asked to take over the helm. Due to the low speed, the ship was difficult to keep on course, but with much muddling along, we succeeded to maintain our course in a more or less Western direction. Another problem was that we had a compass with a compass light, but that we did not dare to use that light out of fear of being discovered by airplanes. Our system now was that we now and then lit a match to check the course, and then choose a star in the right direction and maintained our course by that star for another 15 to 20 minutes. A compass rose painted with phosphorescing paint would have been a great help to us.

At ±23.00 hrs the crew were one after the other summoned by Mr. Hack into the engine room to hear that according to his estimate, there was fuel left for only another 10 minutes of sailing, because when he knocked on the fuel tank inside the engine room, he could only discern a little bit of fuel left. But it appeared that we had made a mistake, as even after several hours the engine was still running happily. The source of the fuel is a mystery to all of us up to the present day. In the meantime, we arranged a kind of watch system in order to relieve the helmsman periodically. To keep the passengers quiet, we had placed all male passengers on look out and had told them a story about floating mines. Also Mr. Hack had decided that he would act as the commander, and that nobody except for the crew, was allowed to enter the engine room. The weather remained excellent and the sea as calm as one could wish. This was a very lucky fact, because, if the weather had been even a bit worse, without any doubt we would have lost some people. At dawn, we started to redistribute the deck load as we were a bit nose-heavy. Also the two man-holes were inspected, and from them emerged very useful things like oilskins and emergency rations. The rations were stored safely and well in the engine room because we had no idea how long the trip to England would take, and the emergency rations were only to be used in case of a real emergency. From the beginning there was a great need for liquid.

Towards 8.00 hrs the overheated cylinder was re-engaged after Mr. Hack had gained an understanding of the cooling system. Now the ship obeyed the helm much better, and it was decided to alter course to W.S.W. For us, setting the course was a matter of guesswork and being confident that the chart we had used during geography lessons, had remained in our memories in the right proportions. We kept this course up to approximately 15.00 hrs when the course was changed to S.W. and later to S.

² 'Jhr.' ('Jonkheer') a noble rank comparable to 'esquire'.

³ Probably the 'Nederlandsch Jongelings Verbond', comparable to the YMCA.

The passengers were very conscientious watch keepers and some floating objects were reported accurately. In the morning we started making a preliminary list of passengers, this was because there were many German speakers among them. Later we copied this list onto the back of a Chart of the Dutch Life Boat Stations. We found this chart only after we had broken into a locker containing emergency flares.

Toward 16.15 hrs we observed smoke on the port side of the boat. After some deliberation the course was changed towards them, as we could safely assume that they were not the enemy. They appeared to be some paddle steamers who, under the protection of some destroyers, were probably mine-sweeping.

Once nearby, we hoisted the Dutch flag and a blue flag with a knot in it (somebody had been told that this might be an emergency signal). Then we stopped the engine and waited for instructions from one of the destroyers, which was very busily signalling us, but of which of course none of us could understand anything. The destroyer H.M.S Venomous then lowered a boat, assuming that our engine was out of order, to tow us alongside. At the same time, another tug was approaching, also from Amsterdam⁴, fully loaded with people. It appeared to be a demolition party from IJmuiden.

Alongside the destroyer, we discharged our passengers. We were summoned to sail to Dover. After we told them in friendly and polite words that we had no idea whatsoever of our position, we were told to also come on board. The Zeemanshoop continued her trip with another crew. In 1943 I saw her in Holyhead and it amazed me that so many people could find a place on board. I guess that we must have ended somewhere near the Goodwin Sands, because the coast could not be seen, and once aboard the destroyer we arrived in Dover in only an hour.

This is my story. A story that I have tried to describe to you as accurately as possible. However, I can not guarantee absolute accuracy. You might get this after Messrs. Hack, Bongaerts and Dahmen have sent their accounts to you. For this reason I give you their addresses insofar as known to me:

LtII H. Hack, 320 Squadron c/o R. Neth. Navy dept. North Row London WI.
Lt.VI. J. Bongaerts, Vliegveld Gilze-Rijen, N.Br.
Lt.Tz. II K. Dahmen, presumably at the Marines, and to be contacted through London, otherwise the other gentlemen may know his address.

I end this letter offering my apologies for this affair. It was absolutely illegal, but it saved the lives of many Jewish passengers and for us was the ideal way out. In case in the future – which Heaven forbid – our country might surrender again, the N.Z.H.R.M. is on my list again to lose a lifeboat. As penance I ask you to register me as contributor.

Your willing servant, yours faithfully,

< Signed > Meyers

⁴ In the original copy 'from Amsterdam' is manually crossed out. It is not known who added this and other manual remarks and corrections.