

Mr. W.G. Belinfante ¹
The Hague, January 21, 1946
Van Beverningkstraat 13

To the Noord- en Zuid Hollandsche Reddingmaatschappij, ²
Heerengracht,
Amsterdam

Gentlemen,

I read in "De Reddingboot" ³ that you asked for more detailed information about the journey of the lifeboat "The Zeemanshoop" ⁴ on May 14, 1940 from Scheveningen to England. In the following account it will become evident what I report from my own knowledge and what I derive from information provided by others.

On Tuesday evening, May 14, 1940, my sister, Mej. Mr. A.J. Belinfante and I went by bicycle to the harbour of Scheveningen in an attempt to find a boat in which we could make the crossing to England. On the harbour quay we saw in a corner a group of people and when we came closer, we saw that the life boat "The Zeemanshoop" was ready for departure. I asked one of the bystanders: "Where will that little boat go to?" and somebody answered "To England". On asking "Is there any place left?" someone answered: "If I were you, I would jump on board." And so we did. It must have been about quarter to nine, and at approximately 8h.55 the boat pushed off.

A man from Scheveningen who had helped start the engine, jumped ashore in the outer harbour. Apparently this was agreed before. On board, if I remember well, there must have been 47 people.

When we departed, it was becoming dusk. A few airplanes passing over as we left the harbour, paid no attention to us. (I do not know whether they were friends or foes.) The Scheveningen lighthouse spread a welcome light.

After some 20 minutes at sea there was an incident. Up to then, the boat was going very slowly. (later I was told that only one of the cylinders was working, and that in the darkness it was not possible to repair the other one.) Some passengers decided that at this speed it would be better go back than continue the trip; thanks to the determination of the "crew" we continued the journey. There was no food on board, except for the little that some had with them; however, as I heard afterwards, there was some water and some cognac; the "crew" wisely have kept this secret.

The weather was splendid. The sea was calm and hardly anyone was seasick. The course was due West. Nobody on board knew anything about navigation, but the task was not too difficult; there were compasses and the Polar Star was carefully kept at 90 deg. to the right. (Of course, the possibility of sea currents was not taken into account.)

¹ The Dutch 'Mr.' is a formal title of a person (male and female) with a university degree in law. Literally: 'Meester' = English: 'master'. Hence also 'Mej. Mr. A.J. Belinfante'. (Dutch 'Mej. = English 'Ms.')

² Abbr. 'N.Z.H.R.M.' (old) or 'NZHRM' (modern). The NZHRM is the Dutch equivalent of the English RNLI. After the war, NZHRM became KNZHRM (= 'Royal NZHRM'), and after a merge with sister organization KZHMRS it became the present KNRM.

³ 'De Reddingboot' (literally 'The Lifeboat') then was and still is the magazine of the NZHRM.

⁴ Belinfante consequently spells "De Zeemanshoop" in stead of 'de "Zeemanshoop"', here consequently translated as "The Zeemanshoop".

Later, I understood that the course was changed to approximately WSW, in order to end up in the Thames Estuary.

There was a continuous lookout for floating mines and every suspect floating object was carefully avoided.

The next morning, when it was light again, the "captain" – Mr. Hack – succeeded in starting the second cylinder, which increased the speed considerably. This was a tricky moment. The fear was that the engine, instead of running better, would stop running altogether.

That morning we again saw planes, this time apparently English. I do not know if they saw us. We did not encounter any ships. The sea was empty.

Remarkably, nobody was hungry or thirsty, although during the day the sun was shining continuously. Apparently this was forgotten due to the feeling of stress.

In the afternoon, I think at about 3 pm. we saw ships approaching us from the SW. The "captain" hoisted emergency and other flags and we were seen. The biggest of the three ships (it later appeared to be the destroyer "Venomous") stopped and signalled us with a signal lamp, which of course none of us could understand. After that the destroyer launched a boat and we were told what to do. That was: to go around the destroyer and as close as possible along the lee side of the ship. That was done, and the seamen helped us to climb aboard on nets.

"The Zeemanshoop" was tethered to one of the accompanying ships and was later, as you know, put at the disposal of the Dutch Navy.

It is noteworthy that, while we were kept busy with this rather lengthy picking-up manoeuvre, at the same position another small boat arrived, a harbour steam tug from IJmuiden, full of Navy men (and one civilian); they were also taken aboard the Venomous, and this little boat was also taken with.

On board the "Venomous" we were told that, at the position where we were picked up, we had made about 2/3 of the crossing. We also heard that we had gone straight across mine fields; evidently thanks to our shallow depth, nothing had happened.

On board the "Venomous" we received a warm welcome. Immediately a meal with tea and bread was prepared, and later we were allowed to go on deck. We landed at Dover sometime between 5 and 6 pm.

Thus far the story of the journey. The most interesting part however had occurred before we arrived at Scheveningen harbour. About this, I have heard the following.

The gentlemen Hack, Bongaerts and Dahmen, all three students in Delft, had gone by bike to Scheveningen in an attempt to get away. At the harbour they met a student from Groningen who had the same intention. They observed somebody attempting to get a fishing boat. A fishing boat was offered for sale, but no crew was willing to sail out. The candidate-buyer and others who were present – it was about half past seven – went away empty-handed. The four students however were undaunted. They continued their search and found two life boats. One of them was firmly locked, but the lock on the engine room of "the Zeemanshoop" was easily forced. They decided to try their luck, convinced as they were that this was a good ship and that there was sufficient oil and fuel on board for a long journey. They also relied upon their technical knowledge of engines. Finally – as I mentioned before – a Scheveningen man assisted them in starting the engine.

About the alert foursome I can inform you as follows: Hack – our captain – has served with the Dutch Merchant Navy and the Royal Dutch Navy. He later became "engineering officer" at the Royal Dutch Naval Air Service (RDNAS). Bongaerts joined the well-known Mitchell-Squadron of the RDNAS, as far as I know as a navigator, and was awarded the D.F.C. Meyers became a fighter-pilot with the R.A.F.; as far as I know – unfortunately – he went "missing". About Dahmen I never heard anything further.

I herewith enclose a specimen of the "News Chronicle" of December 4, 1945, containing an article about the trip. In a book or magazine that appeared in the Dutch East Indies during the war – I do not remember the title anymore – I have read an account of the trip that was written by one of our fellow passengers. That account however was dramatized to make it more interesting, but, as I remember, went far beyond the truth – I mention this in case this story is ever handed to you as realistic.

In conclusion, I sincerely wish to renew my membership of the N.Z.H.R.Mij.⁵, and my sister (address also van Beverningkstraat 13, The Hague) wishes to become a member of your Institution as well. I ask you to register the two of us for a subscription fee of f5,- per annum. Moreover, I have transferred to you by Giro, and on behalf of my sister as well, an amount of f100,-.⁶

Yours faithfully,

< signed > Belinfante

⁵ *Spelling by the author.*

⁶ *At that time equivalent to app. £ - / 10 / -, resp. £ 10 / - / -.*