

Commemoration of the Escape of the Dutch
Motor lifeboat "Zeemanshoop"
On May 14th, 1940

'To go on, or to go back?'

R.K. Hack

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Summary

My name is Radboud Hack and I am the eldest son of Harry Hack, the self-declared 'skipper-engineer' of the motor lifeboat Zeemanshoop during her trip from Scheveningen to England on May 14th and 15th, 1940.

Not very long after the Zeemanshoop had left the harbour of Scheveningen to set sail to England, on board a bitter controversy arose about the question "Shall we go on, or should we go back?"

In the early morning of the 15th of May the question was put forward a second time. In both cases it was decided to go on, and as far as we know, Harry Hack played a decisive role in that decision.

I happen to have some affinity with ships and shipping, and in the past years I have analysed the trip of the Zeemanshoop from a nautical point of view. As far as I know, this has not done before.

I suppose this is because for most people a lifeboat is synonymous with seaworthiness, and "if the seaworthiness of that boat was beyond any doubt, if the trip itself was made without any major trouble, and if within a day all people were standing safe and well ashore in Dover, why then analyse this trip from a nautical point of view?"

As a consequence, the discussions about the controversy tend to be held in moral terms: 'the brave versus the faint of heart', and 'determination versus wobbliness'.

Accidents with modern passenger ferries demonstrate however that every well-built ship, even a lifeboat, becomes a floating coffin when it is overloaded.

And that is exactly what happened with the Zeemanshoop in May 1940.

It appears that the trip was a very risky enterprise, and it is a miracle that everybody survived. Thus, the question 'to go on or to go back?' was not a moral issue, but was a mere matter of life and death. Even more, it was about 'to be murdered by the Nazi's or to die at sea.'

In my lecture I'll answer the following questions:

- What made me undertake this analysis?
- What risks the Zeemanshoop had to cope with after she had set sail to England on the evening of May 14th, 1940?
How seaworthy was the Zeemanshoop at that moment?
And was the stability of the Zeemanshoop sufficient with 46 people standing on her deck, a load she was never designed for?

It appears that the risks were many and severe, the seaworthiness marginal, and the stability insufficient. The lack of stability resulted in the ever present danger of capsizing, and a capsize would irrevocably have resulted in the loss of all lives on board.

- Could the people on board know about these dangers and did they know?

Yes they could, and yes they did. Everybody on board who at any moment proposed "to not go on anymore, but to go back" had a serious point.

- Did Harry Hack know about the dangers?

In 1939, Harry Hack made a round-trip to the then Dutch East Indies (Java) as an apprentice-engineer on board of the Dutch passenger liner "Kota Baroe". With his scientific training in mechanical engineering, his broad interest, his analytical mind, his contacts with the nautical officers, and with plenty of time to analyse the things around him, he developed a thorough understanding of the behaviour of ships at sea.

The relatively quiet night from 14th to 15th of May offered him plenty of time to apply this understanding onto the situation of that moment, and made him aware of the risks and dangers of the trip better than any other person on board.

- This leads me to the last question:

What made Harry Hack decide both times 'to not go back but to go on', whilst he knew about the risks better than anyone else on board, he was a 'safety first' person by nature, and he was fully aware of his responsibility for 45 other lives on board?

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