

## THE RUNNERS FROM THE NETHERLANDS

Through the past five decades a lot has been written about the deejays on the offshore radio stations, lesser about the technical side of the organisations and almost nothing about the crewmembers on the radio ships, which were anchored in international waters of Western Europe. We often heard that the crew members lived their own life on the radio ships but was that true? In the early nineties I was in contact with a few of the many runners, hired from Wijsmuller Company in Baarn, Holland. This interview was earlier published in Freewave Media Magazine as well in Offshore Echos. The three persons interviewed were: Teun Pronk (TP) and the captain's Abraham Hengeveld (AH) and Wietse Plantinga (WP).

HK: On which radio ships did you work and during what period?

TP: I worked on three different radioships in the mid-sixties. Firstly the Caroline ship, the bigger one, better known as the MV Fredericia. I was there from the very start when the ship entered Greenore harbour. The ship came from Kloding in Denmark, where it was used as a ferry between Sweden and Denmark.

HK: What were the first activities done on the ship?

TP: We were informed that the ship would enter the harbour, and that it would be rebuilt for its new purpose. The first thing we did was paint out with black paint the name of the ship and so 'Kolding' was removed. It was then that one of the letters from the ship's name 'Fredericia' was dropped. Of course when you were standing next to the aftside of the ship you could still read the name.



### LETTER MISSING

HK: What do you remember from the period the ship was rebuilt in Greenore?

TP: Honestly not too much. Don't forget it all happened way back in 1964. I've worked 40 years as a runner on several ships and a lot has happened during those years. I was on the payroll at Wijsmuller, as most of the crewmembers on the Fredericia were. If you're a runner you have to bring a ship from one point to another, after arriving at the harbour you get a telegram or phone call which tells you which ship you've to go next. Most crew members on the offshore ships in the Sixties worked as runners and were there for shorter periods.

HK: There have often been stories written, about problems between the Atlanta radio staff and those from the Caroline ship, when both ships were in Greenore, with equipment stolen from the competitor's vessels. What happened exactly?

TP: Nonsense, nothing at all. We as crewmembers didn't notice anything. There were a few Swedish technicians on the ships to look after the transmitters and studios. The radio people, who presented the programmes, were not there at all and only arrived at the last moment before leaving Greenore. They were flown into Ireland and brought to the ship. Directly

afterwards, the Fredericia sailed into international waters, broadcasting as she went. From the very first day at sea test transmissions were made by Simon Dee.

HK: That's very interesting, for up till now it has always been thought that Good Friday 1964 was the very first day of test programmes.



FIRST TENDER

TP: Probably no one heard the first programmes, as no attention had been made by the newspapers. Simon Dee, who came from Canada, was the very first radio man I saw on the ship and also Chris Moore, who joined us at the same time. Captain Bakker from Holland was responsible for the ship and had orders to anchor the vessel off the Harwich coast. Later he was replaced by Captain MacKay, who came from Scotland. Baker was also paid by Wijsmuller Company and MacKay directly by the Irish owner O'Rahilly.

HK: How was life on the radioship and what was the reaction when the station switched on for the very first time. I think this must have been a terrific moment.

TP: The atmosphere was very good. The test transmission announcement was linked by non stop music tapes, which were brought aboard from London, where they were recorded. As I said already, Simon Dee was on the ship, but to me he was not a likable person. I don't recall anything at the moment about Chris Moore, the second announcer on the ship in those days.

HK: Where there any problems during the trip from Greenore to Harwich?



### OFFSHORE 1

TP: None at all, only when we arrived at the anchorage off Harwich. The captain had to go ashore for instructions, telling him where to go next, as I said; he was then replaced by the Scotsman. But when we arrived we were of course illegally transmitting radio programmes and we couldn't go into national waters with the Fredericia to take the captain. So during the night we took the wooden rowing boat and with the help of a little motor attached to it, we took Captain Bakker to the beach on Clacton-on-Sea. From there he had to work out for himself how to get this next destination.

HK: What happened afterwards?

TP: I went for a short holiday and not too long after than in June 1964 returned to the Fredericia. A few days afterwards the Irish owner came aboard with an Australian to tell the crew that Radio Caroline had merged and that we would be responsible for taking the big ship around the coast to a position off the Isle of Man. During this journey Captain Abraham Hengeveld was responsible. I remember that the station was on the air during this beautiful trip and that the Captain made regular appearances in the programmes, telling the listeners about the journey.

Talking about Captain Hengeveld, I spoke to him too:

HK: I heard your name mentioned during the trip to the Isle of Man as well as that you were heard several times on the air on Caroline North. This all in a period of a few weeks time and then we never heard from you again on that station.

AH: I was captain on that ship for about six weeks. This started after it was decided that the Fredericia should be repositioned from the East to the West for it was better for the Caroline organisation to transmit from both sides of Great Britain. The crewmen from those days were partly paid by Wijsmuller and partly direct by the Caroline boss. The fact that the crewmembers were paid by two different organisations brought problems. My task was to smooth away the disagreements and I had to work to a point where the crew members would only consist of people working for Wijsmuller, so 100% Dutch. Also the Captain's papers and administration was not done in the proper way by my predecessor.



## OFFSHORE 2

HK: The station stayed on the air during the trip from the East to the West coast.

AH: After talks with the owners it was decided that during the trip to the west coast we should sail close as possible along the coastline and that the station should stay on the air until the ship was anchored on her new position off the Isle of Man. Normally the station was off the air during a part of the evening and the night. From Harwich we went across the Thames Estuary and the straits of Dover and after we had sailed along the south coast we

steamed right up to the Irish Sea. We had chosen the longest trip so we could be near as possible to the shoreline. From the shore the people could see the ship passing them and of course our 61 meters high mast was a real fascination for them. When car owners on the shore were watching us and heard our special announcements we asked them to flash with their lights, which happened very often. It was clear to us that we had got a brand new audience.

HK: So you can say that this was the very first flashing programme in the history on Offshore Radio?

AH: Of course, at a later stage, deejay Johnnie Walker regularly did the flashing during his programmes. Many years later I heard it also on the Dutch service on RNI. I remember it as a very fine experience. Even the people at the lighthouses were switching with their lights, while we were passing them.



TENDER ALONGSIDE

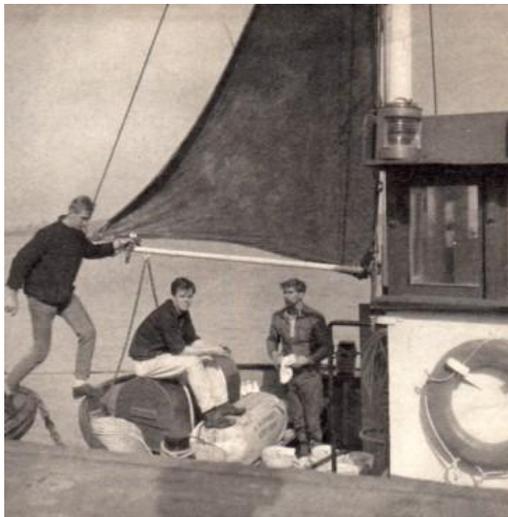
HK: One of the crewmembers told me that he didn't recall any unhappiness aboard the ship.

AH: I was a freelance captain which is so to say that I was hired from the Wijsmuller Company to several ship owners and that I always had the command on a ship which had to be brought from one point to another. The

task I had on the Fredericia was to talk with all the crew members and for those who were hired by the Caroline organisation to persuade them to go to work for Wijsmuller too. I have worked on many ships of several sizes and didn't fear the task at the Fredericia at all. Also I got the order to bring a more normal life on the ship.

HK: Was there munity?

AH: You can't talk about munity, but the crew was very dissatisfied and I thought they were right in being so. They were on the ship for more than two months and when I came aboard it appeared to me that nothing was organised for amusing them during the many hours they were off duty. When they'd finally all signed a contract with Wijsmuller they got off the ship after a six week period. Also money was available for me to buy all kinds of games, money for subscriptions on newspapers and magazines etc. Of course a crew on a radio ship has far more free time than on a normal ship.



### ON THE WAY TO THE RADIOSHIPS

HK: Who was responsible for the Fredericia before it was brought to the West?

AH: It was a Scotsman named Mac Kay, who was hired by the Irish owners. Like every captain he was responsible for administration and to write his logbook daily on all the activities on the ship. He however did it on his own way which wasn't really the correct way; no one else could understand

anything in the log. It was a load of rubbish. There was also no list of payments to the crew and the provisions list was not complete.

Let's go back for a moment to my talks with runner Teun Pronk.

HK: Do you remember anything about the trip to the West?

TP: I remember that Tom Lodge arrived on the ship along with a few others. Part of the shows during the sailing to the West was presented by our captain. After we arrived at our new anchor position we were first tendered with little yachts. The first thing which was brought aboard were some sacks of potatoes, I still have the photographs. After a few days a little coaster from Douglas, which was hired by the Wijsmuller Company, started tendering the ship with fresh water, food, oil and other things men need on a ship.



TENDER ALONGSIDE MI AMIGO

HK: Did the Offshore I and 2 show up in the Irish Sea?

TP: Of course they went there, but at a later stage. Once I made a trip to the Fredericia with the Offshore I. We left from IJmuiden in the Netherlands with captain Bunninga in charge. He had previously worked for the Shell company and was at first Captain on the Offshore I before going on the Fredericia and then on the Radio London ship, the MV Galaxy. He was a man of the world, a very nice guy. Well we left from IJmuiden with Bunninga, Willem Spaan and some other guys. It's like yesterday that I remember this trip. The pilot boat entered IJmuiden harbour due to very bad weather and we left the harbour at the same moment. The trip to the

Isle of Man took much longer than normal. We left around twelve in the afternoon and the next day we sheltered off the south coast off England. We anchored in a little bay to get some rest and to see some people. After we had a proper meal we left again for our destination and only at the third day arrived at the new anchorage near the Isle of Man. The Offshore I was completely filled with provisions and as it was a former fishing vessel it had a very big hold.

Let's go back to Captain Abraham Hengeveld:

HK: Captain Hengeveld, how was the arrival on the Isle of Man?

AH: After we dropped anchor, the senior deejay asked me to make another speech on the radio and I said something like: "This is Captain Hengeveld from the Fredericia, the Caroline ship. Good afternoon to you all." After that I told to the listeners that we didn't come to bring them unrest but to entertain them with relaxing musical radio programmes. From the reactions, we received from the coastal areas, we knew immediately that people were glad that we were there. The very first day, two men in a rowing boat came to see us and brought bunches of heather on board, which was a nice and friendly idea. The fishermen came regularly alongside to bring us fish and ask us to play requests.



**CAPTAIN BUNNINGA**

HK: Overall, how were those first six weeks on a radioship?

AH: I've sailed almost all the seas of the world as a freelance Captain and before that I was a pilot on a ship as well as a harbour master in Indonesia. But as I recall the trip with the Fredericia was one of the finest experiences during my career.

HK: One of the Captains on the Offshore I and II during the sixties was Captain Wietse Plantinga. I asked him how the tendering to the radioships was organised.

WP: It was done from several harbours; mostly we used Harwich and IJmuiden as our bases. Officially we had papers that stated we were going to Panamanian territory, as the radioships were mostly registered under that countries flag. At a later stage Honduras came in too as the Olga Patricia was registered there. Mostly the tender crew consisted of five men. I was responsible for the little ship, the Offshore 2, which became the Eurotrip during the Seventies. Ted Ouwerkerk, Peter Hamers en Jos Gommers where three of the crewmen who regularly went to sea with me. From IJmuiden we took provisions, fuel and water and from Harwich mail, programme tapes and technical equipment when it was needed. Our shipping agent in Harwich phoned the deejays and technical staff telling when we would arrive at the old Parkstone Quay in Harwich, so they could be there in time to be taken to the radio ships. We tendered several of the ships off the British coast. At a later stage, after the MOA came in, we also used Dutch and Irish harbours for tendering the Caroline ships.



OFFSHORE 1 ALONGSIDE MI AMIGO

HK: How did you get your job at the Offshore Suppletie Maatschappij, which was a part of the Wijsmuller Company in Baarn?

WP: I'd been on the Atlantic-shipping route for many years as a deckmate first and through the years I worked my way up through all the jobs until I became Captain. As more and more jobs were dropped due to the fact that more and more companies used air transport, I thought I'd look for some more restful work and get a job at Wijsmuller.

HK: One thing which interests me is how the deejays acted on the tenders?

WP: The atmosphere was always very good but on the Offshore 2, as this ship was a little one, they very often became seasick, especially when they had been on the Offshore I a few times. This was much bigger and had a large cabin. On the Offshore 2 there was much less space so they had to stand or sit on deck. Such a trip from Harwich usually lasted around two hours and during bad weather this brought a lot of green faces.



### TENDER ARRIVED

HK: Back to Teun Pronk. How were the contacts with the people on the Isle of Man?

TP: 100% very good. After we had been on the ship for a six week period, we first went down to Ramsey to stay at an hotel during the night. Under the hotel was a very nice pub where we were invited every time by our listeners. They knew exactly when we would come in. On the station a lot of commercials were played in favour of the Isle of Man. Talking about

commercials I can say that I was the very first voice to be heard in a commercial on Radio Caroline. One day Simon Dee asked me if I could read live on air a message for an Egg Company. I didn't have problems with it and asked a favour to Simon to play a record for my wife in exchange. This was repeated several times during the following weeks. It was a so called one-liner commercial which went something like: "Go to work on an egg, go to work on a lion egg."

HK: Much has been said about the registration of the radio ships. Let's hear your side of the story concerning the Fredericia.



### ALMOST THERE

TP: During the trip to Greenore the ship was still registered in Denmark. Immediately after arriving at the harbour, this registration was dropped in favour of another country. We were not told where, every time we asked this to the Captain we didn't get an answer. I never saw an official flag during my stay on the ship. It was rumoured that the ship was registered in Panama.

HK: After you had been on the ship for a third period you left for another radioship.

TP: I went for one period to the *Mi Amigo* off the Harwich coast, where there was very fine enthusiastic crew and staff. I remember more of the radio staff. Tony Blackburn was working there. I knew him very well and he was a very nice chap, who was always joking with the crew. A few years ago I suddenly saw him back on Sky Television; he was older but still had the same character, what a difference from Simon Dee.

HK: After the time on the *Mi Amigo* you also went to the *MV Galaxy* from Radio London.

TP: Yes, that was a former American minesweeper, which had served in the American Navy. I was only there for three days and after that I never saw the ship back again and I must truthfully say that I never listened to Radio London at all.

HK: How were the wages in those days?

TP: No problem at all. We were paid every Friday on the radio ship and on the day we left for a shore break. At all time we were paid regularly and everything was arranged properly.

HK: Are there any special events from those days that you recall?

TP: The one thing I recall is that during the trip to *Greenore* and at a later stage at the *West Coast* a film crew was aboard the ship shooting a documentary on the station. It was shown on British Television although I've never seen it. (Since then Teun has seen the film from my video archive). I've still got some photos of the film crew. They did some interviews on the deck as well in the large messroom, which had lovely pin-up posters on the walls.



### FILM CREW

HK: Where there a lot of visitors who came to the ship?

TP: The fishermen came on the ship on a regular basis and during the weekends listeners came out in little boats to bring nice gifts and ask for request and dedications. A lot of artists were taken to the ship for promotional purposes. I remember people like Sandie Shaw, Sarah Vaughn, Freddie and the Dreamers and more, who all came out to the Fredericia. All fine memories and I regret that I was there just for three periods.

Photos with this article:

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