

The Zeewijk Story

by

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INTRODUCTION

On the 7th November 1726 the recently built Dutch East Indiaman *Zeewijk* left Rammekens near Vlissingen in The Netherlands.¹ She was bound for Batavia, Java with a compliment of 208 seamen and soldiers. On the 13th November *Zeewijk* arrived at the Road of Downs off the English Coast and ten days later, after having lost two anchors and one of her cables, she finally set sail for the East Indies.²

Zeewijk was a Zeeland ship, one of five East Indiamen constructed by the Dutch East India Company in 1725.³ She was 145 ft long (40.60 m)⁴ and had a draught of 19.75 ft (5.53 m) in her stern and 17.5 ft (4.9 m) forward. She was registered at 140 lasten⁵ (278 tonnes) and armed with 36 iron and bronze guns and 6 small breech-loading swivel guns.⁶ The master carpenter and supervisor was Hendrick Rass.⁷

On her maiden voyage *Zeewijk* carried heavy ironwork, bricks and cash money in ten chests amounting to 315:837 guilders.⁸ Provisions for the long journey to the East Indies included barrels and cases of meat, fish, groats, butter, cheeses, wine and brandy.⁹

The originally appointed Skipper, Jan Bogaard was not on board. He was ill and unfit to sail and so Jan Steyns from Middelburg was nominated to take his place.¹⁰ This change of command was to be of great significance for the fate of the *Zeewijk*. For Jan Steyns the *Zeewijk* was to be his first and last command.

THE JOURNEY

After a journey of 4¹/₂ months, *Zeewijk* arrived at the Cape of Good Hope on the 26th March 1727.¹¹ There, the crew brought ashore cargo which had been loaded for the Cape. It is not known what was actually brought ashore but the unloading took ten days. In a letter from the Governor and Council of the Cape of Good Hope to the Gentlemen XVIII (Supreme Board of directors of the Dutch East India Company), it is stated that the goods and provisions carried in the Company's ships for 1727 had been delivered in good order according to the invoices and bills of lading sent with them. However, in the letter there is a statement that 4098 pieces of grey brick stones and 1 donkey, which had died on the voyage, had not been delivered from the *Zeewijk*.¹² When the unloading was completed, ballast was taken on-board and three days later, on the 21st April 1727, *Zeewijk* slipped her cables and set sail for Batavia. It was on this leg of the voyage that Jan Steyns made an unfortunate decision – despite the protests of the steerman. The ship's log of the 21st May 1727 reads: "... it was decided unanimously to steer ENE, if there is an opportunity, in order to, if feasible, call at the land of Eendracht"¹³, (Western Australia). This decision contravened the strict sailing orders of the Directorate of the Dutch East India Company which warned skippers of the low off-shore reefs and sandbanks off the Western Australian coast.¹⁴

According to the Governor-General and High Council of the Dutch East Indies, Jan Steyns took the *Zeewijk* too close to the coast thus causing the loss of the ship.¹⁵

THE DISASTER

At 7.30 p.m. on the 9th June 1727, with the small sail and foresail set and both topsails double-reefed, *Zeewijk* ran aground. The ship had struck on the northern edge of Half Moon Reef in the Houtman Abrolhos, near the land of Eendracht. In the dusk the surf breaking on the reef had been mistaken for reflections from the sky.¹⁵

The ship crashed with full force. The rudder was knocked out of the helm-port and the main mast broke and fell overboard. As the second mate, Adriaen van der Graeff made his way to the steerage he found that the ship had filled with 8 ft (2.25 m) of water. Outraged the crew blamed their master Jan Steyns for having caused the disaster.¹⁶

At daybreak, the castaways observed 10 to 12 islands lying approximately 4 km from the ship, which they assumed to be Frederick Houtman's Abrolhos. According to the ship's journal their position was 28° 50' S., 128° 19' E.

CASTAWAYS

After having been exposed to the heavy swells and breakers on the reef for over a week, the crew finally managed to launch the longboat. Ninety-six members of the crew reached the shore of a nearby island, which is known today as Gun Island.¹⁷

This island is 800 m long and 350 m wide, approximately 64 km from the mainland – the land of Eendracht. It is a flat rocky limestone island with narrow sandy beaches situated on the inside of the reef where *Zeewijk* was wrecked. It is treeless, has sparse vegetation and the highest point rises only about 4 m above sea-level. However, to the survivors from the *Zeewijk* wreck the most important factor was that the island had fresh water.¹⁸

Soon after the camp was organised a group of 11 of the best seamen under the command of the 1st Officer Peter Langeweg, decided to sail to Batavia for help. The longboat was put into order and on the 10th July, a

month after the disaster, she sailed for Batavia;¹⁹ but no help was to come, the longboat never reached Batavia.²⁰

On Gun island the castaways spent their time looking for fresh water and collecting food. Some caught seals or birds, while others, whenever possible, tried to get to the wreck in order to collect victuals.

THESLOEPIE

By the end of October, it became obvious to the survivors that something must have happened to the longboat. On the 29th October, there is a significant passage in the journal: "... from the wreck we have, to the best of our ability, despatched a good deal of victuals ... as well as timber, rope and iron fittings, everything, in short, which could serve for the building of a new vessel for our rescue ..." ²¹ The forecastle and important features such as planks, beams, knees and the spare main mast and the mizzen mast stump were taken from the *Zeewijk*. In addition, a group was sent out to search for timbers on the nearby islands.²¹

On the 7th November, the keel was laid on what was to be a 20 m long and 6 m wide boat called *Sloepie*. Victuals, as much as were thought to be required for the voyage to Batavia, were collected and stored in a separate tent.

On the 16th November, *Sloepie's* sternpost was erected and two weeks later the stern.²² The vessel was launched on the 28th February and the *Zeewijk* crew celebrated the event by consuming some of the wine that had been saved from the wreck.²³

During the following days the castaways warped their yacht, and the 2nd mate Adriaen van der Graeff made an exploratory tour in the gig to plot *Sloepie's* course through the shallows. Finally, on the 26th March, they weighed anchor and set sail for Batavia.²⁴ On board were 88 officers, seamen and soldiers, 120 less than left The Netherlands 1^{1/2} years earlier.

The month-long journey to Batavia saw the deaths of another 6 men before finally at 5 o'clock in the evening on the 30th April 1728, *Sloepie* arrived at the Batavia Roads. The journey that had started on the 7th November 1726, had at last, come to an end.²⁵

THE TRIAL

Eighty-two of the crew and the cargo of money from the *Zeewijk* had been salvaged. The skipper Jan Steyns however, had to appear before the High Court of Justice at Batavia and take the consequences of his fateful decision to call at the land of Eendracht. In a letter from the Indies to the Gentlemen XVIII the skipper Jan Steyns is accused of *Zeewijk's* disaster by having "... approached the 'Zuydland' (In the documents of the 17th and 18th century, the Dutch navigators referred to the Australian coast as the 'Zuydland' or the land of 'Eendracht') too recklessly contrary to the known orders and the protests of the steersman..."¹⁴ He was also blamed for having tried to deceive the Governor General and the High Council of the Dutch East Indies with altered or falsified journals, in order to cover, if possible, his significant role in the disaster.¹⁴ Jan Steyns, therefore, was put under arrest and sued. All his property and cash were confiscated. He was deprived of his office and salary and declared forever unable to serve the Honorable Company. In addition, he was banished forever from the territories under the jurisdiction of the Company.²⁶

The last minutes of the proceedings and resolution of Gentlemen XVII, concerning the fate of *Zeewijk* and its crew is dated August 30th 1729. It states that it has been approved and resolved that the earned monthly wages will be paid to the heirs of the men who had died in the *Zeewijk* disaster.²⁷

THE REDISCOVERY OF ZEEWIJK

In 1840, 113 years after *Zeewijk* was lost on the reefs and shallows of the Indian Ocean, the British survey ship HMS *Beagle* landed on the island where once the marooned survivors had camped. They found a brass four-pounder swivel gun, with a breech-block and the Dutch East India Company's initials VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie), engraved on it – thus the island

was named Gun Island. They also found ornamental brass work, for harnesses, the gilding still well preserved, two Dutch coins dated 1707 and 1720, clay pipes and a number of stout Dutch wine bottles. Stokes, of HMS *Beagle* who related this also mentions that the bottles had been placed in a row, as if for the purpose of collection water. He considered the bottles to be very large and capable of holding about 25 litres.

During his visits to the Abrolhos, Stokes observed guano deposits (bird droppings accumulated over centuries and used as fertilizer) on some of the islands in the Pelsaert Group, among them Gun Island. Private enterprise soon started to exploit the valuable guano, and it is known that from 1844 to 1850 at least four ships transported guano from the Abrolhos.²⁹

In 1879 the Deputy Surveyor General John Forrest went ashore on Gun Island to locate and evaluate the guano deposits. He found scarcely any guano and stated that there was only a few tons to be procured. In the same report he mentions the remains of the *Zeewijk* survivors' campsite: "Found the old encampment of the *Zeewijk* party in 1727. Number of broken bottles, iron, a cannon balls, broken wine glass, number of clay pipes in perfect preservation (and) also two coins, one of copper about the size of the half penny with 'Hollandia 1720' on it and the other the size of a four penny with 'Zeelandia 1722' on it..."³⁰

In 1884, after having tested the quality of the guano on the islands, Charles Edward Broadhurst formed the partnership of Broadhurst and McNeil Guano Contractors. The firm leased Gun Island and 19 other islands in the area for 5 years, a lease which was to be renewed several times during the following years.

The guano diggers cleaned the top soil of many islands and at times up to 90 vessels were chartered to transport the guano to various places throughout the world. The boom lasted to the turn of the century when the guano industry became uneconomic due to rising costs and the competition from chemical fertilizers. However, by that time the surface of Gun Island had

been stripped to bare limestone rock except for a narrow strip of sand dunes on the western and northern end of the island.³¹

The deposits on Gun Island had been one of the most heavily mined in the Pelsaert Group, and as a result a large amount of *Zeewijk* relics were encountered. Fortunately the Broadhursts were interested in their discoveries and any artefact found during the course of digging was carefully collected and listed. Among the finds recovered during that period were musket and cannon balls, fish hooks and lead weights, kettles, jars, pots, bottles, wine glasses, tobacco boxes and clay pipes and different types of silver and copper coins. In 1897, following the renewal of their leases for several times, the Broadhursts supplied a list of finds to the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (see Appendix 1).³²

POST 19TH CENTURY EXPEDITIONS TO GUN ISLAND

In the 20th century there have been various visits to Gun Island. In 1952 six cannon, three cylindrical pieces of iron and two bundles of iron bars were located in the shallows on the inside of Half Moon Reef. Three of the guns were raised and one twelve-pounder and one eight-pounder are now with the Western Australian Museum.³³ The cannon might have been carried into the shallows by the *Zeewijk* crew with the original intention of transporting them to Batavia. However, the presence of the cylindrical pieces of iron and the iron bars indicates that the cannon could probably originate from a major piece of wreckage that was washed over the reef when the ship broke up. Alternatively the cannon may have been jettisoned in an attempt to refloat the *Zeewijk*. This could have happened but seems unlikely as it is not mentioned in the ship's journal, and as it does not explain the presence of the other cannon on the top of the reef and in the shallows.

In 1963 the author and journalist Hugh Edwards, in cooperation with the *West Australian* newspaper, organised an expedition to the island. The shallows inside the reef were searched and digs were carried out at random on the island. In the shallows, five cannon, broken bottles, timbers, iron bars, lead and cannon balls were found. Two iron cannon were raised.

What was thought to be the old *Zeewijk* camp was located with a metal detector and barrel rungs and metal fragments were found down to 1.5 m. During the course of digging, human bones, rosary beads, pottery and clay pipes were recovered as well as fragments of broken glass and a glass bottle.

A fisherman showed the expedition members his own 'private' digging site on the island and after uncovering the surface of the place a camp fire, a knife blade, a heap of barrel rungs, bones and fragments of glass and pottery were revealed.

In 1968 Hugh Edwards searched outside the reef for the main wreck and in march discovered major wreckage consisting of anchors, cannons, and a large mound of conglomerate.

In 1968 British Petroleum operated an unsuccessful oil rig on the island. During the construction work a guano camp on the east side of the island was demolished and several Dutch graves were unearthed on the west side. Two skeletons and the mask for a Bellarmine jug were found.³⁴

From 30th April to 17th May, 1972, a combined underwater and land survey was carried out in the area by the Underwater Explorers Club under the supervision of a member from the Maritime Archaeological Department at the Western Australian Museum.

An investigation of the inside reef revealed five large conglomerates which appeared to be kegs of nails and large quantity of metal tubing of different shapes and sizes. Various anchors and cannon as well as a breech block were also found.

A random land digging revealed bones, broken pottery and fragments of glass and clay pipes.³⁵

In 1976 the Maritime Archaeology Department at the Western Australian Museum commenced the *Zeewijk* Project – a combined land and underwater survey of the *Zeewijk* site. The aim of the project is to plot and record the remains of the wreck on both sides of Half Moon Reef, and to locate and excavate the old *Zeewijk* encampment on Gun Island.³⁶

The work is currently being carried out by the Museum and it is estimated that the fieldwork will be terminated at the end of 1978.

NOTES

1. Rammekens was a fortress on the Zeeland island of Walcheren situated on the coast a few miles NE of the town Flushing.
2. Heer, C. de., *The wreck of the East Indiaman Zeewijk at the Abrolhos Islands in the year 1727*. A translation of the ship's journal with a short introduction and notes. p.i ff.
3. Minutes of Gentlemen XVIII, February 23rd, 1725 K.A. (Koloniaal Archief) 267.
4. One Amsterdam foot = 0.28 m.
5. One last = 1.976 tonnes.
6. Heer, C. de., *The wreck of the East Indiaman Zeewijk at the Abrolhos Islands in the year 1727*. p.1.
7. Minutes of Gentlemen XVIII, February 27th, 1725 K.A. 267.
8. Letter of the Governor-General and High Council of the Dutch East Indies to Gentlemen XVIII dated Batavia, October 31st, 1728. (Algemeen Ryksarchief in the Hague) Netherlands, Kol. Arch. 1974 OB 1729 1 fol 8 vso-14).
9. Journal of under-steersman Adriaen Van der Graaff (ARA, VOC Archives, Zeeland, series nr 1691).
10. Minutes of the proceedings and resolutions of Gentlemen XVIII (ARA Kol. Arch. 267).
11. List of ships arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in 1727 (ARA, Kol. Arch. 4082, OB Cape 1728 I, fol 138-139).
12. Letter of Governor and Council of the Cape of Good Hope to Gentlemen XVIII (ARA, Kol. Arch, 4082, OB Cape 1728 I, fol. 37 vso-38 vso).
13. Heer, C. de., *The wreck of the East Indiaman Zeewijk at the Abrolhos Islands in the year 1727*. A translation of the ship's journal with a short introduction and notes. p.i.
14. Letter of Governor-General and High Council of the Dutch East Indies to Gentlemen XVIII, Batavia October 31st, 1728 (ARA, KOL. Arch. 1974 OB 1729 I, fol 8 vso – 14).
15. Heer, C. de., *The wreck of the East Indiaman Zeewijk at the Abrolhos Islands in the year 1727*. A translation of the ship's journal with a short introduction and notes p.7.

16. Ibid – p.6-7.
17. Ibid – p.8-16.
18. Bevacqua, B., *An archaeological evaluation of Gun Island*. Maritime Archaeology Department, WA Museum, 1974. p.2 ff.
19. Heer, C. de., *The wreck of the East Indiaman Zeewijk at the Aboelhos Islands in the year 1727*. A translation of the ship's journal with a short introduction and notes p.21.
20. *Ibid* – p.58.
21. *Ibid* – p.58. ff.
22. *Ibid* – p.61. ff.
23. *Ibid* – p.93.
24. *Ibid* – p.95-101.
25. *Ibid* – p.113.
26. Heer, C. de., *The wreck of the East Indiaman Zeewijk at the Aboelhos Islands in the year 1727*. A translation of the ship's journal with a short introduction and notes p.iii.
27. Minutes of the proceedings and resolutions of Gentlemen XVIII Aug. 30th 1729. (ARA, Kol. Arch 268).
28. J. Lort Stokes: *Discoveries in Australia*, April 24th 1840, London 1876. Vol. II.
29. Bevacqua, R., 1974. *An archaeological evaluation of Gun Island*. Stencil, maritime Archaeological Department, WA Museum, p.5.
30. Forrest, J., (n.d.) 1879. Report on a visit to the Aboelhos Island, 1879, Battye Library, Perth.
31. Bevacqua, R., 1974. *An archaeological evaluation of Gun Island*. P. 6-7.
32. Transactions of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, 1897 (also referred in Western Australian Newspaper 27.8.1897).
33. Playford, P.E., 1974. *The wreck of the Zuytdorp on the Western Australian coast in 1712*. p.13.
34. Edwards, H., 1975; Personal communication.

35. Stewart, J., UEC Expedition to Zeewijk site 30th April – 17th May 1972.
36. Ingelman-Sundberg, C., 1976. *The VOC ship Zeewijk 1727, Report on the 1976 survey of the site.* Australian Archaeol. Nr. 5.

APPENDIX I

To the Hon. Secretary, Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, Victoria.

Dear Sir,

The following is an accurate list of the relics found on Gun Island of the Houtman Group since our occupation. Articles sent by us to Sir John Forrest, and now in the Perth Museum: 3 large and 24 small cannon balls, 15 flagon-shaped bottles, 1 earthenware jar, 14 rosary beads, 9 lead sinkers, 22 clay pipes and stems, 5 copper fish hooks, 5 knives (much corroded), 6 pieces of lock flint, 7 brass buttons, 5 leaden weights, 16 pistol bullets, 2 copper kettles, 1 glass tape, 1 copper pot, 1 copper vessel with cover for padlocking, 1 wine glass, 2 pieces ordnance, 1 silver coin, Phillip IV of Spain, 3 copper coins, between 1702 and 1724, sundries including a small piece of copper marked 'Zeeland' and two remains of lignum vitae block sheaves; 1 silver coin sent to Wm. Marden, Esq., 14 Fenchurch Street, London, E.C. (A rix-dollar of the City of Utrecht, date 1726).

In possession of Mrs G.A. Clifton, Perth: 2 wine glasses of very antique fashion.

In possession of M. Brown, Esq., Geraldton: 1 wine glass, similar to above.

A few copper coins, and sundry of the flagon-shaped bottles, besides a few odds and ends have got into the hands of the public through our employees. They could not be traced or enumerated. Summary of coins: 18 silver and 48 copper, 2 copper pieces off musket, one inscribed 'Kamer Zeeland', the other 'Cameer Zeeland'. (Chamber of Zeeland).

A large number of copper articles, comprising fish hooks, manufactured on the spot; roughly made copper dishes for using grease lights in; numerous kinds of buckles, some of which are apparently gilt, more or less; ordinary pins (of copper) with old-fashioned heads; sundry scissors, several spoons and part of spoons; numerous brass buttons, sundry curtain rings; musket fittings; funnel; tap; seaman's hanger (cutlass) guard; copper parts of blocks and sundry small articles of different kinds, all copper.

A number of iron articles including remains of knives; several cannon balls, two sizes; two shells for ordnance (one of these still had black matter resembling powder in it); chest locks, chest handles, sundry pieces corroded iron.

A number of leaden articles; fishing sinkers; weights; spoons; and upwards of 1,000 pistol bullets of varying sizes.

One pair very fine silver buttons (for officer's cape); legend on them, Joseph escaping from Potiphar's wife. These are just now in London. Several varieties of work in Lignum vitae wood. Several lumps of pitch excavated 5 feet deep. A number of different shaped bottles of various sizes. Two tobacco boxes with devices. A number of sundries; clay pipes and stems, broken wine glasses and broken tumblers, fossilised cork, several hundred rosary beads, broken pottery, pieces of slate, bone razor handles and buttons, part of old flint gun lock with undecipherable Dutch inscription; sundry pieces flint.

List of coins found on Gun Island, Houtman's Abrolhos, since January 1, 1894: three silver coins about the size of an English half-crown piece; Latin inscription all fairly decipherable. Dates 1633, 1638, 1638, Phillip IV., King of Spain and the Indies (PHIL. III., D.G., HISP. ET. INDIAR. REX). The monarch in the centre, this on one side, and on the other a coat of arms with a lion standing on each side, and the inscription ARCHID. AVST. DVX. BRVG. BRAB.: 1 small silver coin, Dutch, 1657, Frisia; 1 medium-size silver coin, Dutch, 1690, lat. Inscriptions; 1 small silver coin, Dutch 1709 Hollandia; 1 small silver coin, Dutch, 1722, Zeelandia; 1 small silver coin Dutch, 1724, Zeelandia.; 4 silver coins, dates not decipherable, 37 copper coins, dates from 1702 to 1723, Dutch; 1 British coin, copper, George I, 1720; 1 Chinese coin, which a Chinese merchant in Geraldton tells me belongs to the time of Mon late, King of China, 835 years ago; 52 coins in all, besides 2 pieces of gun locks marked 'Cameer Zeeland', and other odds and ends.

Besides the foregoing list, Captain J. Lort Stokes of HMS *Beagle*, discovered a piece of cannon in 1840, and other articles mentioned in Major's *Early Australian Voyages*. Surveyor-General S.J. Roe, of Western Australia, also found some articles in the sixties; and finally Sir John Forrest during his visit to the Abrolhos in 1882 made some further finds of clay pipes, etc.

Our own discoveries complete the history of these relics to date.

We trust you will find these particulars useful, and mentioning that press copies of this communication are being furnished by us to the British Consul at Amsterdam and to the Hon. Secretary of the Hakluyt.

Society, British Museum, we remain,

Dear Sir,

Yours faithfully,

BROADHURST, MACNEIL AND CO.