

Sometimes it is better not to know all that is going on about you

When the Japanese invaded Java in February 1942, the U.S. Navy gave orders that all US personnel were to be evacuated. The wounded were to be evacuated as well, but only those that could walk. Dr. Wassell moved the U. S. S. Houston and U. S. S. Marblehead wounded to the port to be evacuated. He tried to get twelve sailors onboard ship that could not walk, but they were denied boarding. Dr. Wassell decided to stay behind with these twelve sailors to care for them while they waited for the Japanese to capture them. However, Dr. Wassell then decided to try to get the men to the coast to be evacuated on another ship. Dr. Wassell managed to transport these wounded men to the coast, all the while keeping just ahead of the Japanese forces. Dr. Wassell managed to get them onboard a ship called the M.S. Janssens. From there they managed to reach the harbor of Fremantle, Australia.

Ambulatory patients were transported by train to Tjilitjap, and were to catch any ship available. The Dutch had set up cots for the wounded in a house. They spent a couple of days in the house awaiting transport. A Dutch freighter came in, and they took those that could walk to meet it to be evacuated. The captain refused to take them for concern about what would happen to them if the ship sunk.

February 24, 1942, these men were transported to the port where they were placed aboard the U.S.S. Sturgeon (Walter Joyner and Robert Clark), the U. S. S. Pecos, a Navy tanker, and M.V. Abbekerk (a Dutch freighter). Oscar Rudie, Harold Hunter, and one other went aboard Abbekerk. Two of the crew gave up their rooms to Mr. Hunter and the other sailor that couldn't walk. The ships separately left port for Fremantle, Australia, The wounded then moved on to the United States arriving in San Francisco around May 1, 1942.

This was a bit of history that could easily have ended in tragedy for those aboard Abbekerk.

The third Abbekerk, from Peter Kik Zaandam, Holland and A letter from his father.

The MS Abbekerk was a 7900 brt freighter of the Verenigde Nederlandse Scheepvaartmaatschappij VNS. With a crew of 62 , two powerful diesel-engines and two propellers, she was a fast ship(17 knots officially, but capable of over 20 knots) designed for the Holland – Australia line. Abbekerk was build in Danzig and completed in 1939. Ironically Danzig was the pinnacle of the start of the Second World War and only months after Abbekerk was finished the Germans occupied it and started producing of 94 U-boats on the same shipyard.



Abbekerk was in Abadan or Madras when Holland entered the war and started sailing for the allies immediately. She returned to Liverpool and later sailed to Londen. On September 8, 1940 Abbekerk was hit by two bombs and sunk. She was quickly refloated but it took half a year to get her seaworthy again. She sailed in the second part of 1941 for Australia.

In the winter of 1941/42, with a cargo of mainly ammunition, anti aircraft guns and 12 Hurricane fighters, she sailed in the heavily escorted convoy DM.01 to Singapore. The crew even put anti aircraft guns from her cargo on deck as extra defence. she was in one of the convoys desperately trying to strengthen the defences of Singapore against the Japanese. The Hurricanes and guns were quickly unloaded but harbour workers simply refused to unload the ammunition. The crew then unloaded part of it but after a couple of days no empty barges came anymore. By that time there were no bombers left in Singapore for the heavy bombs Abbekerk was carrying. Abbekerk then, being a very fast ship for its time , sailed alone to Oosthaven where she helped to destroy (sink) barges and unloaded some more cargo. But she also had to unload all her Bofor guns and the English troops that manned it.

Just before the Japanese invasion she sailed alone to Tjilitjap where she became an evacuation ship for troops and refugees. With over 1500 evacuees on board she sailed from Tjilitjap 27 February and was one of the lucky ships to arrive safely, despite being attacked by a Japanese aircraft.

This is where my Dads story now begins:

When we arrived in Tjilatjap the harbor was filled with ships. Big freighters, some smaller passenger liners and a bunch of warships of different nationalities. This time no anchorage far away from the rest (because of cargo), but a place directly at the jetty—clear proof of the desperate situation. Without hesitation, more of the ammunition was quickly unloaded; Workmen came aboard and started, obviously in a hurry, making latrines along side the ship with a long gutter that ended overboard; also, kitchen materials and food were brought aboard. Soon we learned our next orders. We were being prepared to be an evacuation-ship for army, air force, and navy personnel from all different nations, no longer of use, and ship them off to Australia. To us it looked like one would need an entire fleet to do that; but, we were curious and it couldn't go fast enough.

Meanwhile we saw ships come and go. Outgoing ship mostly packed with refugees. One day all of the warships left port for, what we learned later, the Java Sea where on February 28 and March 1 they battled the Japanese. Just to name another date.

On February 27, all ships in the harbor got the order to leave that evening for Ceylon or Australia; so everyone had to hurry. Not only the workers unloading ammunition, but also the bulk of the refugees still heading for the ship. The unloading of ammunition stopped. It turned out that all of the lower cargo bays were still full; the hatches could be just closed above it, and nothing of the cargo was visible now.

In the course of the day, men came aboard. A more diverse group of men I never saw before. Aircraft crew with thick jackets, some high officers, a few lower officers, soldiers, sailors, armed, and unarmed—some more civilians. A lot of very worried and tired faces. But, imagine, most left family and all they had behind for a very uncertain future. They were scattered over the whole length of the ship and the first cargo decks. I'm not sure but I think everybody got a field bed. This was a very difficult situation for most. They had to leave their trusted surroundings and were now, literally packed into the cargo holds of a freighter. For sure not a place you could escape from easily when things went wrong.

So that same day, in a very slow pace, 24 big and small ships, including the “Zaandam” and the “Jagersfontein”, left port knowing the sea between Java and Australia was packed with Japanese warships, aircraft carriers and lots of submarines. Each captain was allowed to take his own route and in the engine room, the engines were pushed to the limit.

None of the passengers knew the lower cargo holds were still filled with over two thousand ton's of munitions; and, I think every crewmember knew it was better to keep it that way. Nobody spoke about it. And, as far as I know, the same was true about the staggering number of SOS calls broadcasted from ships all around us. Does this misery never end?

More than ever before I realized I would never get used to working in the engine room in wartime, hearing and seeing nothing of what is going on outside; but especially the knowledge that somewhere, not far away, somebody is ready to push the button and drop a bomb or fire a torpedo. Even off duty every second of the day and night, you could be blown to pieces. Every time my shift was over, I felt relieved to get myself up onto the deck again; but then, thinking about the cargo, that feeling was short lived. All the crew must have felt the same.

There was some distraction the next day, when a single engine Japanese scout plane appeared. He clearly observed us and probably radioed his findings to warships or carriers close by. What a pity we didn't have our anti aircraft guns anymore. All the people were on deck now. Shots were fired with all rifles and revolvers available. Yes, even our 10 cm anti submarine gun was manned and fired a couple of times. Lots of noise off course, but the plane turned away and disappeared. Not because of our shooting but I guess he knew enough—so what now?

The bridge ordered even more power from the engines, and they got it! When darkness fell, the Skipper made a radical course change. The next morning, at the break of day, the bow of the ship was still powering through the waves at full speed, and knowing we covered a significant distance, we became a little hopeful for the first time; but, nothing was sure yet, still we received SOS calls. But, in the end we reached Australia and the harbor of Perth.

Not a single person of the hundreds of refugees on the ship ever realized they slept only centimeters above the ammunition. One grenade remained in the barrel of the anti-submarine gun and we asked the Port

authorities permission to fire it onto the sandbank at the entrance of the harbor. Everybody who wanted, could see and hear this spectacle; and, with the big fountain of sand came an end to a nerve wrecking voyage for everybody on board, but the crew in particular.

Yes, we had been very lucky, although we didn't really realize that at the time. It turned out later that of the 24 ships that left Tjilatjap only 13 arrived at their destination. The future of the possible survivors of the sunken ships was very unsure. Especially when picked up by the Japanese.

At the end of over three months on the ship, Perth was a big relief. The city was fully lit in the evening and at night. That was unique, first time since the start of the war two years ago. The most memorable were all the girls and women in the city. Imagine, we've been looking at the same faces for so long now. No, this was proof there was still some beauty in this world. This is what the English call: "salve for sore eyes". Strange you always have to experience that all over again. Besides the fact there were nice and lighted shops where really everything was for sale. What a contrast with England. And, everything seemed to smell nicer too. The sun shone more beautiful than anywhere else in the world and the food on board tasted better than ever. Your bed felt so good and we slept like babies. We turned into other people overnight. Normal, people one could say.

During our time in Perth, we got two Oerlikon anti-aircraft cannons on the bridge. Well, cannons? They shot very big bullets with machinegun speed into the air. It was a very reliable Swiss brand. After the cargo was unloaded at last, we were ordered to Bunbury, a place nobody had heard of before. END

From Fremantle she sailed with timber (imagine the relief of the crew) alone to Abadan and continued via Durban to the Caribbean and, still lucky, crossed the Atlantic alone in the most successful period of the German Uboats. By now she had been in tropical waters for almost two years and her biggest defence against Uboats—her speed—was now seriously compromised by the barnacles and algae on her hull. Her skipper tried to get her a place in a dry dock in Port of Spain but unfortunately there was no space.

On her way to England heavily loaded with sugar she failed to outrun a U-boat spotted half a day earlier and was hit by a torpedo from The U-604 at quarter to midnight on August 27 1942. By the time a second torpedo hit the crew had abandoned ship in two lifeboats. 60 of the crew were picked up three days later by the corvette HMS Wallflower. Two of her crew didn't survive her sinking.

A ship is a 'she'

Generic rule: If it's a ship, it's big; if it's a boat, it's small. If a vessel can be put aboard a larger vessel, it is a boat. There are at least two exceptions: Submarines and the ore carriers of the Great Lakes are always boats.

The exact reason why ships and boats are called she in English is lost to history. While explanations abound, most appear to be of the folk variety, assumed or invented after the fact as a way to make sense of the phenomenon. Boats are a truly interesting case in English, as they are among the only inanimate objects that take a gendered [pronoun](#), whereas most others are called *it*. Countries are also called she, as are [cars](#) sometimes, but the latter example is almost certainly an extension

Could it be that "A ship is called a 'she' because there is always a great deal of bustle about her. There is usually a gang of men about. She has a waist and stays. When she is all decked out, it takes a lot of paint to keep her good-looking. It is not the initial expense that breaks you, its' the upkeep. It takes an experienced man to handle her correctly; and without a man at the helm, she is absolutely uncontrollable. She shows her topsides, hides her bottom, and when coming into port, she always heads for the buoys."