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SINKING OF THE LUTINE 1799

The never-ending story of a shipwreck

By: Gerald A. de Weerd

Accidents happen, certainly in the world of shipping. The inhabitants of the Dutch islands Vlieland and Terschelling know this better than anyone. These islands form the north-westerly corner of the Netherlands, the point where one of the major shipping-routes of Western Europe curves around. Unfortunately it is a very tricky corner. The waters are shallow and large sandbanks reach out for miles from the beaches. Only in clear weather a sailor can see the islands before his ship runs aground. That is why, before the introduction of electronic positioning systems, so many ships has wrecked on these coasts. In particular in the times of the sailing-ships, even in such a number that it was for centuries one of the basic elements in the island economy.

When in the stormy night of the 9th of October - 1799 the HMS Lutine ran upon the outerbanks between Terschelling and Vlieland, it was not really a surprise to the population, just another victim in the long line of accidents. The publications about this wreckage that appeared in the media simply confirmed that a strong gale caused, as usual, this accident.

But, in this case things were not as simple as they looked.

Before I go further into this I like to picture first what brought the Lutine into this place after all.

Four years back, in 1795, The Netherlands were invaded by the French army as part of the expansion-policy to spread the principles of the French Revolution. To stop this expansionism England decided to invade the Netherlands in order to drive the French troops out again. In August 1799 a large-scale invasion took place and 30.000 British and Russian soldiers landed in the northern part of Holland. The British Northsea-fleet, under the command of Vice-admiral Mitchell, entered the Dutch inner-sea, the Zuiderzee, and took possession of the remains of the Dutch war-fleet. The frigate Lutine played an active role in these actions, but when the situation became more or less stable, the ship was ordered to sail back to England, to her home-port Great Yarmouth and wait for new reinforcements to be transported to Holland. But then the Lutine got an unusual assignment instead: a special delivery of an exceptional large quantity of bullion and money to Hamburg.

Compared with the hectic battle-actions during the proceeding months, this trip was more like a holiday tour. Apart from the cargo also 30 passengers embarked. As soon as the cargo was loaded the ship sailed in the early hours of the 9th of October from Great Yarmouth, taking a north-easterly course to the Northern islands of The Netherlands with the intention to change course from there in a more easterly direction towards the Elbe-mouth. During the day the weather changed and in the evening, when they approached the Dutch islands, the wind had increased to a strong gale from north-westerly direction. In the dark, at about 11 PM the Lutine sailed under considerable speed on a half-wind course on the outerbanks west of Terschelling and instantly upset. Obviously the crew lived in the assumption to sail much more northerly, on a safe distance from the islands.

The damage was very heavy and it did not take much time before the crew understood that the ship was lost. The heavy breakers that develop on these banks in stormy weather, particular with Northerly winds, are notorious. Just in a few hours the ship was totally wrecked. Before the ship fall apart the crew managed to fire a few cannons and launch emergency rockets. These signals were noticed on the islands but the difficult position of the ship, about 4 miles from the beach, and the gale made immediate rescue-actions impossible and all crewmembers and passengers, together 270 men, drowned except one man. This man was found alive the next morning when the wind had eased off and rescue-ships were able to approach the area of the wreck.

Until two years ago the story lived on that a heavy storm caused the loss of the ship. An unfortunate coincidence of natural circumstances. Lloyd's paid out a huge sum of insurance money and the case was closed.

Two years ago, when we decided to organise a Lutine commemoration-year on Terschelling and Vlieland; we dived into the subject again. Analysing the existing publications from the past it became evident that the story was far from complete. Relevant details about the accident itself or the following investigations were remarkably limited. The deeper we went into the subject, the more mysterious it appeared to be.

Analysing the circumstances during the wreckage we came to the conclusion that the storm alone could not have caused the accident. The facts were these:

- The ship herself was in a perfect state of maintenance, about one year before the ship had been overhauled completely and the rigging renewed.
- The crew was highly experienced, both in handling of the ship and in the navigation in the coastal waters of the Dutch and German islands. This part of the Northsea had been the primary patrol-area for the Lutine before she got involved in the invasion.
- A storm like this, when sailing half-wind, was certainly not a problem for a large frigate like the Lutine, not more than a routine procedure.

Our conclusion so far is that the cause of the accident is what it is usually: human failure.

Therefore we got more and more interested to know what the only survivor had to tell. No doubt that this crown-witness has been interviewed. But, strangely enough, not even his name could be found in the files. What we found was just a brief note in the Log-book of Captain Portlock of HMS Arrow, the ship where the man was taken aboard. Here was written that the man recovered with the help of the ships-surgeon and gave some information about the Lutine and her destination. But then the information stops, not even his name was mentioned. Going through all available relevant files of the Admiralty archives we discovered that an intensive correspondence started directly after the accident between the Admiralty in London, Captain Portlock of the Arrow and even the commander of the invasion-fleet Vice-Admiral Mitchell aboard HMS Isis. But it appeared that all these letters had been taken out of the archives. Even more surprising was the fact that no records of a further investigation, such as a court-martial, exist. We could not deny the conclusion that all evidence about what really happened has been systematically removed. This only emphasises even more that the only survivor had an unpleasant story to tell, the story of a human error that caused the accident.

Further thorough research in the Admiralty archives just confirmed more and more that all traces of the Lutine-story were wiped out. But at last, we found a small but valuable detail: in the muster-list of the Isis, the flagship of Mitchell, new arrived crewmembers were registered. On the 18th of October, nine days after the accident, a certain John Rogers, able seaman, came aboard and the ships-clerk wrote a small note near this name: "from the Arrow, the late Lutine". Comparing this with the last existing muster-list of the Lutine this man indeed sailed on this ship. So we finally found who was the mysterious survivor and now we could see what became of this man. Although this man's legs were seriously wounded he was kept on the Isis for a long time. At last, when the invasion-campaign was over and the Isis returned to British waters he was sent to the Hospital ship Spanker in January 1800. But after treatment he was still not allowed to go ashore but was placed on HMS Grana, moored near Sheerness. After months he disappeared silently and was never heard of ever since. This proves that one tried to keep him out of sight, far away from, for example, the media. Probably his story about human errors would embarrass the Admiralty. Lloyd's would have refused to pay out the insurance money and what to think about the drowned passengers. Among them was a group of high-class civilians, nobility from England, France and Luxembourg. Relatives of them certainly would have demanded some satisfaction for the loss if the Admiralty was to blame.

The salvage of the cargo.

Immediately after the wreckage salvage actions were organised by the Captains of the nearby moored British warships, like the Arrow, the Swinger and the Pelter. And they were not the alone. Dutch fisherman also showed much interest, considering the note in the Logbook of the Swinger on the 11th of October: "Sent the Cutter manned and armed with Lieut. Braddel to the wreck to Prevent the Dutch from Robbing Her". During the few weeks that the English ships stayed near the islands all kind of objects was salvaged from the wreck, like weapons and food. Remarkable is however that nothing is said about the gold or silver.

As soon as the English left the area the full-scale hunt for the treasure started. In that time the art of diving with helmets was still unknown. The first actions in 1800 were done from the surface. The water was only 20 feet deep at low tide and the first treasures were obtained by hooks, "kippers" and "tongs", fastened to the ends of long poles. One managed, under the supervision of the Burgomaster of Terschelling Mr Robbé, to bring 58 gold-bars and 35 silver-bars to the surface. A respectable amount but it was also the end for a long time because new sand was rapidly shifting into the wreck and in 1801 the wreck was completely covered.

In 1821 a new series of attempts was initiated by the new burgomaster of the island, Mr. Eschauzier. He obtained a Royal concession in which was defined that 50 % would go to the Dutch Government. Although the attempts were fruitless the actions attracted the attention of Lloyd's and claimed to be the lawful owner of the wreck. As a gesture of friendship the Dutch king Willem I decided in 1823 to transfer the claim of the Dutch Government to the English King, who passed this to Lloyd's. The salvage actions went on for years and despite the help of English helm-diving specialists from Whitstable all without success of any significance.

The shifting of the sands slowly covered the wreck again.

While the wreck was hidden under a thick layer of sand during several decades, salvage actions were technically impossible. In 1857 the banks were shifting in another direction and the wreck was found again. This time it was engineer Taurel who took the initiative. He hired experienced helmdivers from the Dutch fisher-village Egmond. In three years they successfully salvaged many goods and no less than 64 silver-bars and 27 gold-bars.

The activities attracted the interest of many fishermen who tried to pick their private part out of the treasure. In some periods the attitude of these adventurers became quite aggressive and the Dutch Government was forced to send a gunboat to protect the Taurel people. In 1959 the well-known bell, now still in use in the Lloyd's building, came to the surface. But soon the sand reclaimed the wreck again and it was not before 1886 that new attempts became possible.

Mr. Termeulen started his campaign but managed to excavate only coins, to a value of 686 Pounds Sterling.

In 1893 the "Lutine Syndicate" was established, a Dutch salvage group in close co-operation with Lloyd's. Here the well-known Mr. Fletcher turned up. Later this changed in the "New Lutine Company" and in 1910 an English organisation: the "National Salvage Association" took over the salvage actions. A large steam-ship with the name of "Lyons" came over from England and many diving-actions have been realised. Nevertheless the profits were disappointing, only a small amount of coins were found and that was all till Worldwar I made an end to this campaign.

After a period of silence in 1933 the merchant Mr. Beckers, from the south of the Netherlands, came to Terschelling. With him he brought a spectacular big diving dome, a steel cone-shaped tower of 60 feet tall that was lowered on the wreck from a large pontoon. This construction appeared much too weak and when the water was pumped out the tower collapsed within a few days.

The following year a new tower appeared stronger en even larger and was successfully placed on the wreck. During the summer the tower slowly penetrated deeper and deeper into the wreck. Beckers excavated many objects, bolts and cannonballs, some coins but that was all.

Further attempts were not possible because he ran out of money.

In 1938 the final "excavation" took place . The largest dredger of the world, the Karimata, owned by the large Billiton Company, started on the wreck. In just a few months the complete wreck was removed, although in pieces but at the end just one bar of gold appeared. The Karimata left and the Lutine story was considered to be ended. One could conclude that:

in 140 years "so little was achieved by so many".

So far every action has been aimed at the salvage of the bullion. Nobody was interested in the wreck itself, it could be destroyed if necessary. But in 1990 it was the diving-team Caranan from Harlingen that approached the Lutine from a totally different angle. Under the supervision of their chairman Mr. Duyf they started a historic-archaeological research with the intention to reconstruct the process of the wreckage. Carefully scanning the wreck-area and the direct surroundings they found many objects of the ship and the inventory, even one of the large anchors. In particular in south-easterly direction a remarkable concentration of Lutine-debries were found. Looking further in this direction a large part of a wreck, at about a distance of 1.2 miles, was detected in the seabed. Recently the divers carried out an orientation-survey into this wreckpart and excavated more than hundred inventory-objects. A thorough research of these objects, and comparing this material with genuine objects from the Lutine, proved that these objects were without any doubt from the Lutine as well.

The sensational conclusion that we derived from this research is that we know now for sure that within a few hours after the moment that the ship ran aground the rear part of the hull, about one quarter, broke off and drifted away. This part moved with the wind and current in south-easterly direction, crossed the Ijzergat channel and ran aground again on the banks on the south side. The attention of the first salvors was directed to the main-section of the ship and so the rear-end of the ship was left alone and forgotten.

At this very moment new excavations are under progress and with the knowledge that special cargo was usually stored in the rear part of these ships, we will not be surprised when some shiny bars will surface in the near future.

Perhaps this will finally be the end.