

RESCUE AT SEA: M.S. NOORDAM OF HOLLAND AMERICA LINE

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In the pre-dawn light of 7 June 2006, two sailors began cleaning the aft deck of the M.S. NOORDAM in preparation for her port call at Kusadasi, Turkey later that day. The 85,000-ton ship is the newest in the Holland America Line fleet, having premiered in New York the previous February, and it was routine practice to make sure that she looked her best upon entering a port. As the sailors began to work, they heard what seemed to be shouting. Looking into the grey light, they saw something in the water. Since it appeared to be human, they immediately called the bridge.

"We got a report that there was a man overboard so we started the [man overboard] procedure," recalled Third Officer Aafke Bergsma who was on the bridge at the time. The ship launched its man-overboard buoys so that it could return to the spot where the man was sighted. Since the ship was approaching the pilot station for the port it had already slowed to 16 knots.

"I came on the bridge a minute or so later," Captain Hans Mateboer remembered. "The bridge officers had released a smoke and light signal attached to a light buoy. They also had pulled the engines down to stop. I reversed this decision, as I wanted to sail back to the location of the smoke. From where we were at that time from the bridge, we could not see anyone in the water, and it would be very difficult to direct the Man over Board boat. The

Chief Officer came on the bridge right after me, and still thinking we were dealing with a MOB, we decided that he would be part of the boat crew. The other person would be the assistant duty officer and the third person, would be that officer reporting to the bridge next."



(Photo: R.H. Wagner).

Bergsma along with First Officer Mark Rowden was given the assignment of launching one of the ship's fast rescue boats to search for the man in the water. "Initially, we thought it was one of our own sailors who had fallen overboard during washing but as soon as we arrived on deck to lower a boat, the guys told us that they saw people in the water, some of them wearing life jackets."

"One person on the bridge reported seeing the person in the water." Captain Mateboer added. "He was closer than I anticipated, and we had not come to a complete stop yet, when he passed on our port side. To my surprise, I saw three persons in the water, wearing life jackets. As this did not add up to a

'Man over Board' situation, I was still trying to figure it out when a lookout reported sighting another person, somewhere on our starboard side. At that time, I realized that this situation was developing into something different. We had not heard any distress signals, so my initial thought was that maybe a pleasure boat had sunk or so. Our fast rescue boat started picking up people and from their reports, it quickly became clear that we were dealing with refugees."

Indeed, the fast rescue boat's search quickly confirmed that there were multiple people in the water. Designed for six people, the boat had soon pulled 18 people from the water. Accordingly, NOORDAM dispatched two tenders to aid in the rescue.

Since the deck officers were involved with launching the boats, Captain Mateboer enlisted the help of the ship's hotel officers as lookouts. Christel Mensink, Guest Relations Manager, watched the scene from the deck of the NOORDAM. "The sound that they were making was almost un-human. I could hear it for days afterward. It was an un-human throat sound that they were trying to throw out. The sound of 'help' wasn't there anymore. It was just a sound. There were these heads popping up and down. Looking with binoculars, you could see more and more people, everywhere in the water."

"The big struggle we had was that they were all spread out. There was like one here, three there, two there, starboard side and port side, in front of us, we just did not know where to start." Mark Zeller, who was acting Hotel Manager during the voyage, remembers. "Guests were coming in saying that they saw them on port side and starboard side

and they were all trying to help to locate them."

Meanwhile, NOORDAM sent out a May-day signal asking for assistance. Although there was traffic in the area, no other vessel would stop. "The whole atmosphere out there, they are so used to people in the water that if you have a brown skin they will just call the coast guard and just let you be there," comments Mensink. Approximately, an hour and a half after the signal was sent a Greek Navy helicopter arrived but by then the rescue was over.

The shell doors, used when the ship is tendering at a cruise port, were opened and the rescue boats brought the people that they had found to them. A medical team, a team with blankets, and hot food were waiting. Members of the ship's crew donated dry clothing to replace the survivors' wet clothing, which was washed and dried. Because of security considerations, the survivors were taken to non-public areas of the ship.

One question of immediate importance was how many people were out there in the water. A man who spoke some English said that there were 20 people in the group. However, as NOORDAM had already picked-up 22 survivors, this information was clearly wrong. Piecing together information from several of the survivors, it was finally determined that there had been 23 people in the group but that one, a child, had died in the water during the night. At that point, NOORDAM discontinued the search.

The survivors were from some of the most troubled areas of the globe including Somalia, Iran, Iraq, and Palestine. They said that they had hired

a boat in Libya in the hope of reaching Europe. Telling them to steer in a certain direction, the boat's captain had abandoned them, jumping ship in a small boat. For three or four days, they said, the boat had drifted before capsizing.

However, the survivors' story did not ring true. "We began to talk amongst ourselves, if a man were onboard for three days, he would have a beard. I would be sunburned after three days in the hot sun and none of them was sunburned and they were all cleanly shaved." Mensink explained. In addition, there was Turkish writing on the life jackets some of the survivors were wearing and some had Turkish coins.



One of NOORDAM's fast boats used in the rescue of 22 refugees. (Photo: R. Wagner).

Confronted with the inconsistencies in their story, the survivors finally admitted that they were from a refugee house in Istanbul, Turkey. They had no prospects in Turkey and so they had paid 2,500 Euros each to sail in a 12-meter motorboat from Turkey to one of the nearby Greek islands. Once in Greece they would be in the European Union with better job prospects, a generous welfare safety net, and liberal human rights laws. During the night, the sea had been quite rough,

Force 6 or 7, and the wooden boat had capsized.

Illegal immigration is clearly not just an American problem. According to the United Nations, "over the last decade, thousands of people including migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and victims of human trafficking, have died attempting to reach Europe by sea." Indeed, UN Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Erika Feller has said: "Rarely a week goes by without some news of an unseaworthy boat that has sunk with its passengers on board, dead bodies being washed ashore on the holiday beaches of southern Europe, and people who have paid huge sums of money to human smugglers whose last concern is the welfare of their clients."

At first, the survivors were quite grateful for their rescue. However, "the minute they found out that we going to Turkey their whole attitude changed," Zeller recalls. They became bitter and began complaining about the cruise ship's food and making demands. This is because, under international law, persons rescued at sea should be disembarked at the next port of call and that country is required to admit them.

Yet, when NOORDAM arrived in Turkey, she found that some Turkish officials were not eager to have the refugees back and would not accept them. Turkey has become a "transit country" for a large number of people trying to reach Western Europe, placing considerable strain on that country's resources. While the UN notes that: "Turkey has made considerable efforts to improve the institutional, legal and administrative framework and procedures in the areas of immigration

and asylum," the realities of the situation make reluctance a natural reaction.

"The Turkish authorities initially were very understanding and told me that they would take the refugees," Captain Mateboer said. "I had to fill in some paperwork (of course) and then everything would work out. The paperwork they needed was on its way, but never seemed to arrive. By early afternoon, I figured that they were keeping me quiet till departure time, at which, I think they hoped I would leave. We collected a lot a small pieces of evidence from the refugees, which did prove that they originated from Turkey, such as recent bus tickets, nearly new Turkish lifejackets, Turkish SIM cards in a few mobile phones etc. However, the Turkish government insisted they did not come from Turkey."

Holland America Line's main office in Seattle, Washington decided that NOORDAM would stay in Kusadasi an extra day while diplomats from The Netherlands, the United States and Great Britain escalated the issue within the Turkish government. This was not an easy decision for the cruise line to make. If the ship stayed an extra day in Turkey, she would not be able to stop at one of the other ports on her itinerary. As a result, the line would lose the revenue it would have made on shore excursions at that port. Furthermore, missing a port would anger some of the 1,800 paying passengers which could jeopardize future cruise sales. However, if the refugees were not accepted here, where would they be accepted? NOORDAM would be left with the choice of having a permanent community of refugees on A-deck or making an unscheduled voyage to the Netherlands, her country of registry, to offload the unwanted guests.

Holland America Line prides itself on its tradition of service to its passengers and thus it put a priority on keeping its guests informed. "We sent out several statements throughout the day both written and verbal messages from the captain," noted Zeller. Some guests were upset that the ship would not be calling in Malta and a partial refund of the cruise fare was given. However, when at the end of the cruise, the officers and staff gave a presentation reviewing the entire incident, they received a standing ovation from the passengers.

On the second day, the Turkish government agreed to accept the refugees. "We are very thankful and appreciative of the Turkish authorities for allowing these people to disembark for later repatriation. We recognize the important commitment the leadership of Turkey has demonstrated to cruise ship safety as well as their respect for international law and their compassion for people who are less fortunate," commented Stein Kruse, President and CEO of Holland America Line in a statement issued at the time. The refugees were led off the ship, some in tears to be back where they had started. A bus drove them away.

The NOORDAM does not know what became of the refugees. Hearsay has it that they were driven a short distance, the doors of the bus were opened and the authorities looked the other way. It would have been uneconomic to repatriate them to their countries of origin. Another report has it that shortly after the NOORDAM incident, the bodies of a group of refugees were found washed ashore on a Turkish beach. Were they the same people? No one knows.

Even with all the difficulties NOORDAM encountered, Captain Mateboer is vehement that he would do it again. "The NOORDAM did act. Of course, we did. There is no way in the world I would not act. I would not know how far one has to lower his ethical and moral standards before you knowingly let people drown. Only by putting the ship and all on board in unacceptable danger would be an excuse not to. Also, Holland America Line as a company would never give me another ship if I would have sailed on. Of course, it will give a lot of problems and issues, but very few people can say that they rescued 22 people. Leaving them in the water is no option. Vessels do routinely ignore their legal obligation. There is no excuse for this."



On 14 March 2007, Captain Hans Mateboer accepted the Navy League New York Council Amver Medal on behalf of Holland America for the NOORDAM's rescue of the refugees off Turkey. Also pictured are Dr. Daniel Thys, President of the New York Council and Mr. John M. Kelley, Senior Vice President of Xerox Corporation, who was Dinner Chairman for the New York Council's 104th Anniversary Dinner. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).