

## Memories of Morse

By Bert Trumpie (ex R/O).



The readers of these memories may regard this as a tribute to Morse (or CW as it is often called). Morse in this context means transmitting information using the Morse alphabet, consisting of dots and dashes. Amateur radio operators still use CW (continuous wave) benefiting from the advantages of this transmission method (e.g. small bandwidth and less subject to interference).

I was born in 1947 in Voorburg, The Netherlands, thus being a baby boomer. In this post war period a lot of effort was being put into rebuilding what was destroyed, including economy, international trade and industrial growth and development. Shipping was a major industry in the Netherlands as this country in fact is a large delta of various European rivers (e.g. Rhine, Maas, Waal, Merwede and IJssel). Water has always played an important role in our lives. We have been fighting it and enjoying it at the same time. Especially in the Western part of The Netherlands, often referred to as Holland, the majority of our land is below sea level. So if we want to keep dry feet, we have to fight the water. When the southwestern part of Holland (Zeeland) was flooded in 1953 during high tide and a severe storm, causing many casualties, a unique plan was developed to avoid such tragedies in the future. This was called the Delta plan and consists of many dikes and dams to keep the water out. No wonder I wanted to become a seaman or sailor. I also had a grandfather who was an engineer in the ship's engine room. Unfortunately he died before I was born, but apparently I inherited some genes from him.

After college I went to the Maritime High School in Rotterdam. But first I had to decide what function I wanted to get on board: Mate, Engineer or.....yeh what else did one have on board as an officer? I wanted to go out on a ship, but had never given it a deep thought as to how or what. As I was wearing glasses since I was eight years of age, becoming a mate or an engineer was out of the question. This was a big disappointment, but when I came across the function of radio officer (R/O) or *sparks*, I cheered up. As a boy I had often played with electronics en electrical things. So *sparks* it was gonna be! It took me almost two years before I could do my federal exams for maritime telegraph operator and another 6 months additional study (including radar technology) at my future employer Radio Holland before I could go out on a vessel. As an R/O you did not find employment at a shipping company, instead you were employed by one company only: Radio Holland, that in return had outsourcing contracts with the shipping companies to facilitate the radio room, its equipment and operation, including maintenance. In fact it was a monopoly. Only Smit Tugs employed their own R/O's. And maybe Weismüller Tugs as well.



In October 1965 I mustered on the m/s Gaasterland / PEFJ of the Royal Dutch Lloyd (KHL) as an assistant R/O. We went from Amsterdam to Las Palmas and onwards to Recife in Brazil and Rio de Janeiro and back to Amsterdam. It was going to be a nine week trip. This proved – as with all things in life – that one develops the true skills practicing it. I had learned to take and send Morse with 20 words per minute, generated by a multivibrator (tone generator), without interference from other ships or stations and without static or fading. It turned out to be quite a challenge. Radio Holland had a contract with the Dutch Press Bureau (ANP) to receive and publish an

onboard news bulletin. This daily news bulletin was sent by Scheveningen Radio (PCH) at 16:00 GMT (UTC as we say today). It was announced as PDRH de PCH px qsy 4/8/12/16/22 MHz, which means as much as 'to all Radio Holland subscribed vessels, HERE Scheveningen Radio for press bulletin at 4/8/12/16/22 MHz frequencies. The transmission lasted for about 45 to 60 minutes and was typed on a typewriter with a number of carbon copies. (*Gawd, if we only would have had a PC in those days. That would have made life so much easier*). Trying to type the news bulletin directly in 'hard copy' without typing errors could save at least an additional hour of work. Lets summarize: 'I had my ups and downs'. Putting a tape recorder parallel to the receiver output did help to retrospectively fill in the missed characters caused by static or fading though.

I learned to eat *bife-the-lomo* and drink *cuba-libre*. I was only nineteen years of age and had my first beer (!) and became drunk for the first time, having a split headache the next day. The static seemed much louder then.

I also had to learn the 'ether ethics' as observed by all telegraph operators, but about which you never had been told at school. An example was a transmission with PCH on Christmas eve. PCH ended the transmission wishing me a *Merry Christmas* in plain Morse text in stead of a code or an abbreviation. I responded with the common **tu su** that stands for *thank you, same to you*. My boss and chief R/O became furious and I was puzzled about his fury. 'What did I do wrong?' It turned out that an unwritten law exists, saying that if you receive plain text messages, you also respond in plain text and don't use abbreviations or codes. Okay, another lesson learned! We arrived back in Amsterdam on 31 December 1965 and New Year's eve was celebrated with my fiancée-to-be and family.



Apparently I hadn't done everything wrong, because only a few weeks later I had to muster on the m/s Attis / PCVY from the KNSM (Royal Netherlands Shipping Company). And I was to be the only R/O on board! It was a small vessel (3,000 tons) and our destination was Bremen, Germany and onwards to the US East Coast, Mexican Gulf (Houston, New Orleans) and the Caribbean, including Maquetia, Venezuela, Paramaribo, Suriname and Georgetown, British Guyana. If I remember correctly, I had an 4U

installation and a Philips BX925A receiver as main equipment. I also had a telephony transmitter. Funny, but I cannot remember that we ever addressed telephony at school in Rotterdam, other than 2182 kHz being the emergency frequency and common calling frequency in addition to the 500 kHz frequency for calling and emergency. I had to learn quick though after the captain received a complaint from the shipping agent in Curacao, Netherlands Antilles that we had not responded to the calling on 2182 kHz of Curacao Radio/PJC for a telephone call. I had always assumed such QRU (I have something for you) would be announced on 500 KHz as QRJ (= I have a telephone call for you). So I kept one receiver on 500 KHz and another standby on 2182 KHz and – lucky me – I received three or four telephone calls that trip from various agents in the Caribbean.

We also called upon Port-au-Prince, Haiti and Cap Haïtien. Haiti had two coast stations with the respective call signs HHH and HIA. HHH sounds like HaHaHa as in laughter and HIA sounds like a donkey. This must have been the joke of the dictator papa Doc and his son baby Doc in later years, because I have never come across an R/O that ever had contact with one of these stations. I've heard once that a frustrated R/O - after docking - walked the pier towards the building of the coast station and found the place deserted, but with all equipment turned on and working! That is some story, but explains it all.



R/O Bert Trumpie on deck of m/s Attis

The static in the Caribbean was horrific, but the propagation apparently was great, because it was no exception to hear PCH or OST and DAN on 500 kHz in the evenings, being close to Barbados for example, or Martinique.

At daytime I had shortwave contact with PCH on 12 or 16 Mhz. Approaching ports like Bridgetown, Barbados (8PO) or Port-of-Spain, Trinidad (9YL), La Guaira, Venezuela (YVG) and Willemstad, Curacao (PJC) could usually be contacted using MF on 500 KHz and MF working frequencies.

I loved Barbados for its *chicken-in-the-basket* and San Juan, Puerto Rico for its *pina collada's* in that little *hole-in-the-wall* bar *El Primitivo* up in de mountains. El Primitivo had the bar chairs hanging from the ceiling. No chance of ever falling from your chair.

Aruba was great for its white beaches and Venezuela impressed me with its cable car from Maquetia to Caracas, all across the mountains and through the clouds.

I made three almost similar trips on the m/s Attis to the Caribbean and the US East Coast. The last one was to Ciudad Bolivar along the Orinoco River, loading bauxite, for aluminum production. It was one full day up the river Orinoco, through the rain forest, hearing the monkeys and the birds. It was fantastic, until we started loading the bauxite. The fine dust of it poured through all the little holes and was found in my drawers, radio equipment, clothes, food (!) and alike. We headed back for Dordrecht in Holland and arrived four weeks later after four weeks of heavy weather with storms and a big swell.



m/s Amstelstad

After some two months leave in which my wife and I got engaged, I was assigned to the m/s Amstelstad /PCPU of shipping company 'Reederij Amsterdam'.

Boarding was in Antwerp. Initially this was going to be a six week European coastal trip. But upon leaving Antwerp for Le Havre (France) it became apparent that we would set sail for South

America. Buenos Aires and Montevideo were the next ports of call. The Amstelstad was a larger vessel of 9455 tons. And I had a larger cabin and radio shack. But no telephony of which I had grown to be very fond. It was CW all the way. The bridge of course had VHF.

From Montevideo we headed for Moji-kō on Kiushu in Japan. Kō means harbor. This was the six week trip they had been talking about, cause that's how long it took. With only a three hour bunker-stopover in Durban, South Africa. We crossed the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean and went through the Strait of Malacca (no pirates then!). The closer we came to Japan, the more Japanese morse traffic was heard, but entirely unintelligible. It sounded as if all dots and dashes were glued together as an endless stream of one endless word. Obvious: I didn't speak Japanese. In the Pacific we had difficulty getting in touch with Scheveningen Radio (PCH), although I managed to get a QSO most of the time during a small time slot on 22 Mhz. The time slot varied from 07:00 to 07:30 or from 10:45 to 11:00. Always in the morning (local time). But that's all I needed. For less fortunate vessels, Radio Holland had arranged for so called relay services. Vessels in – for example – the Indian Ocean acted as a relay vessel for ships in the Pacific. The relay

vessels sent out traffic lists at predefined times. If you were an R/O on a relay vessel you could make quite some overtime. I made my overtime working on the radar. It was an old one and I had to replace many components, klystrons and alike. I had to climb the mast almost every month to adjust a notch nearby the radar antenna allowing to see the cursor bleep in the course direction. In Japan we made the coastal trip that was promised in Antwerp. We 'did' Nagoya, Kobe, Tokyo, Yokohama, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and some others. The third mate had learned us the basics of Japanese: *doomo arigato* (thank you), *ichi beery kudasai* (one beer please), *ichi kofi kudasai* (one coffee please), *konnichi wa* (good day), *konban wa* (good evening), *ohaio* (good morning). Very handy, but of course I still couldn't read Japanese Morse.

The first officer (not hindered by any form of social skills), once asked a Japanese pilot: 'Hey pilot, what did you do during the war?' The pilot didn't react and the first officer continued with: 'Apparently you weren't a kamikaze pilot, hey ha ha ha'. The pilot kept a straight face (as only Japanese can do) and did not blink an eye. I was afraid he would put the ship on the rocks, but he continued professionally doing what he was paid to do.

We docked for two weeks in the Asano dock in Yokohama for the periodic maintenance and some repairs, allowing us to explore more of Japan. We went to the Fujiyama (Mount Fuji) and the memorial park in Hiroshima. And learned to enjoy the Japanese food and the use of chop sticks. It was an interesting period for a nineteen year old.

From Japan we went to the West Coast of the U.S. passing Kamchatka and the Aleoeten Islands. We went to Astoria and Portland and Seattle. The Astoria River was beautiful in autumn with a thousand colors of the trees and their leaves along the river. It was the first time I contacted KPH and KFS and KOK.

From Astoria back to the Philippines (Iligan on Mindanao) and again to the West Coast. Back to Manila en down to Newcastle, Australia (North of Sydney). In Newcastle I took the train to Sydney. It was 31 December 1967 and my fiancée had a niece in Sydney (Dee Why) and I had arranged to visit her and her parents. I spent New Year's eve on the beach in Sydney, barefooted along the waterfront. Never done before. Back home it is freezing cold on New Years eve. The trip back to Newcastle was something else. The train was filled with happy people with too much to drink, celebrating the new year. I made it back in time though and we sailed the same day for Malta (Mediterranean), from where we would fly home. In a DC8. It was my first flight in an airplane. The trip to Malta had to go past Cape Good Hope (South Africa), since the Suez canal was closed after the first Israeli war with Egypt. It was a 6 week trip again. I had become 20 years of age.



My wife and I married in May 1968. Our year of engagement had gone by and although I had spend most of it being away, we felt it shouldn't wait. In June 1968 I had to muster on the ss Statendam/PHSC from the Holland America Line (HAL). Initially the company was named NASM (North American Steamship Company). NASM was nicknamed by the crew as **never arrive Saturday morning; mostly Sunday afternoon**. Hence the name change? It was unusual for a twenty year old R/O to get a passenger ship assignment and I

felt honored. I was the youngest R/O on board in a team of five. Four colleagues on board. I had never had that luxury. During the Atlantic crossings we were obliged to make three newspapers: one in Dutch, one in English and one in French. I was chosen to 'take' the French newspaper. Sent by FFL (St Lys Radio). In 32 words per minute ! With

all the funny characters like à and á and ç and é or è. It drove me up against the wall! And my 'colleagues' all of a sudden were seen by me through different eyes. They were laughing their heads off. I hoped they would choke! It took me hours before I could deliver an intelligible typed copy of the received French news to the pursers office. Here and there I had missed some characters or parts of sentences that I had to make up. It required some imagination. I had an 8 for French when I passed my French exams in college, but I can imagine there must have been French passengers with frowned eyebrows reading the final printed copy of the newspaper. I was glad though we didn't have to take a German newspaper. They have funny characters too, like the ü and the ö.

After the Atlantic crossing, we went cruising. From New York to the Caribbean, Mexico, the Panama Canal, Acapulco, Los Angeles. From Los Angeles we flew back home. It was the second or third time I had contact with KPH, KFS, KOK but I had added WOO and WOM at the East Coast for High Seas Telephony. Of course WSL, WSF, WCC WAX and WOE were there for CW at the East Coast.

Since I had done such miracles with the French newspaper, I was assigned to take the American newspaper from WCC at 01:00 local time as well. Being the youngest R/O on board had its price! That one took two hours, but it was a relief compared to the French one. No funny characters! Only funny abbreviations, like POWs. Of course the US was in the middle of a terrible conflict in Vietnam. It took a while before I figured out what a POW was. The American news also frequently addressed the *apartheid* issue in South Africa. Now that was a word sounding familiar to a Dutchman.

I now regret not to have taken any tape recordings with me of the WCC press transmissions or any other transmissions for that matter. But then again, I couldn't think of my job ever to become obsolete in those days. We had a tape recorder parallel to the receiver output, as it sometimes happened I had to take a pee during the two hours of news transmission from WCC. And it has happened that I had fallen asleep with my fingers all crumbled between the typewriter keys. It was the time I had my wife on board and we had spent the evening having fun instead of me taking a nap before going on duty at 00:00 local time. Strong coffee usually did the trick for me, but not this time.



In 1969 I was assigned to become an R/O on the New Amsterdam / PGGF, again from the HAL. The call sign changed to PJRS when the owner decided sailing under the *Antillian* flag had a significant tax advantage. I loved this ship. It was elegant and had something about it to make you feel at home. I had very good colleagues, one of which I still contact now and then. Two others unfortunately passed away already. Initially the Nieuw Amsterdam did the transatlantic crossings, but as

competition with the airlines became more apparent, this ship also was assigned to cruising. Mostly in the Caribbean. Either from New York or from Port Everglades/Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I still did the WCC press transmissions at 01:00 local time and became more experienced as time progressed. Arranging telephone calls with the High Seas Operators had its charm and sending tens of telegrams to PCH around Christmas or other major events as well. One of my colleagues bought a bug Morse key. He could do wonders with it and made me jealous. So I started practicing it, but I never reached the point where I could make my keying as flawless as with the old fashioned up and down key. And now you have the paddle. Sounds even better and allowing you to ref up you speed much more. I enjoyed socializing with passengers and was once invited to the Mai-Kai dinner show in Fort Lauderdale by a friendly couple: Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw who had celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary on board. I was also given the VW Beatle from their daughter for the weekend. American hospitality at its best!



We painted the radio station and the generator room on the deck above. There were occasions when we had all three transmitters in the air and we enjoyed our work.

In 1970 we were selected to become one of the first ocean liners to get equipped with a trial satellite installation. We could contact ground station Mohave in California and Burum in The Netherlands and do tests with telephony. The echo in those days was annoying. I was assigned as the operator to do the tests and make the reports. The rotation of the antenna's was done manually. Adjustments needed to be done horizontally as well as vertically, dependant on the position of the vessel. It was an interesting time.

Coming into Bridgetown, Barbados I was approached by Mr. Nelson, director at the power station in Bridgetown. He had an amateur station at home and had copied my satellite transmission to Mohave. I was invited to his home and he took me out to the Barbados rain forest. The satellite test transmissions of course were the beginning of a new era where HF and MF transmissions using CW would eventually disappear. It gives me mixed feelings to have contributed to that, but then again, one shouldn't stop evolution and progression, isn't it?

In 1973 it became clear that the Nieuw Amsterdam would be taken out of service and I decided I should move on with my life and find a new career. IT became my second life and till today I have a job in IT as an IT manager in the real estate business. I will never forget my time at sea though. A time I thoroughly enjoyed. And I have sailing as a hobby. I love being in a boat and feel the movement of a ship. Old sailors never die, they just fade away.