



Photo A. In October 1980, the luxury ship Prinsendam, operated by the Holland America Line, was enroute from Vancouver to Singapore when fire broke out in its engine room. (Courtesy of N1EA)

Rescue at Sea: CW Saves the Day

A Casual QSO Recalls a Dramatic Story From Three Decades Ago

by **Randall Noon, KC0CCR**

One of the fun and interesting things about working CW is that a person just never knows who might be working the key at the other end.

On March 24 at 1800 UTC, I made a CW contact with N1EA on 15 meters. That's David Ring, in Green Harbor, Massachusetts.

We had a nice CW chat for 26 minutes on the FISTS <<http://www.FISTS.org>> meeting frequency, 21.058 MHz, on an otherwise quiet band that Saturday afternoon.

My log shows his signal was 599. David sent CW at a brisk clip. Notes in my very hasty, medical doctor-ish scrawl indicate he was being polite by holding back to perhaps 25 wpm while I was barely getting things jotted down. I could tell he was quite capable of leaving me in the dust if he wished.

David and I chatted about the usual things: Rigs and weather, straight keys and cooties, and cabbages and kings. David was operating with a new cootie at the time. He also mentioned his interest in preserving marine radio history. He recommend-

ed a website for me to visit that contained recordings of maritime radio transmissions: <<http://bit.ly/LzII3d>>.

More Than Meets the Ear

When I went to <<http://www.QRZ.com>> to look up his address to send a QSL, I discovered some really interesting stuff about David.

Besides being an Amateur Extra, which I could have guessed from the easy way he operated the cootie, David holds an FCC First Class Radiotelegraph license, an FCC First Class Radiotelephone license, and a Coast Guard Radio Officer license. Those are impressive radio tickets that require work and study.

Those credentials, however, pale in comparison to the fact that David and fellow radio officer, James Pfister, NS1L, are CW operators who helped save 534 people from a possible icy death. Both played an important role in what has been

called the most successful large-scale peacetime sea rescue in history.

Tale of the Prinsendam

The story begins with a luxury cruise liner called the MS Prinsendam, **Photo A**, built in the Netherlands in the early '70s. It was 427 feet long, and could carry about 350 passengers and 200 crewmembers. Operated by the Holland America Line, the ship was enroute from Vancouver to Singapore with stops in Hong Kong and other tourist ports.

On October 4, 1980, the Prinsendam was passing through the Gulf of Alaska, about 138 statute miles south of Yakutat, Alaska — northwest of Juneau along the coast of Alaska and has about 4,000 people in the borough.

'Fire in the Engine Room!'

In the local language, the name Yakutat means: *Where canoes rest*. I suppose the Prinsendam could be considered a very large canoe.

At about midnight on October 4, a fire broke out in the Prinsendam's engine room — a fire so intense that the crew evacuated the area, sealed it, and then flooded it with carbon dioxide.

The fire-fighting strategy didn't work for long, though, as



Photo B. Prinsendam Chief Radio Officer Jack van der Zee, left, with Williamsburgh CRO James Pfister, and David Ring, right. (Courtesy of N1EA)

the hotel manager opened the dining room doors and the fire blazed again. The master of the ship declared that the fire was out of control about an hour later.

The chief radio officer (CRO) of the Prinsendam, Jack van der Zee, **Photo B**, dispatched a radio message requesting immediate assistance. The U.S. Coast Guard at NOJ — the communications station in Kodiak — requested the Prinsendam send an SOS. The master of the Prinsendam declined to do this, only wishing to send an XXX urgent message.

The Gamble of an 'SOS'

CRO van der Zee, literally feeling the heat through the soles of his shoes, decided to make the XXX an SOS so that he could send the automatic distress alarm (Auto Alarm) and wake up the nearby sleeping cargo ships. "I might go to jail for life for this and lose my radio officer's license," van der Zee said, "but I will be alive, and so will the passengers." The gamble worked. Otherwise, the rescue would have likely failed.

(**LISTEN:** To a recording of the actual SOS sent out by CRO van der Zee that night, <<http://bit.ly/KN4Ufa>>. – KCØCCR)

After receiving the Prinsendam's message requesting immediate assistance, the Coast Guard in Juneau organized a rescue mission. Unfortunately, no Coast Guard planes, helicopters or ships were close to the crippled ship. Doing the best that could be done, the closest helicopter and a maritime patrol turbo-prop airplane were dispatched to the scene.

The Coast Guard Cutter Mellon was diverted from its usual patrol to intercept the Prinsendam. At the time the cutter was near Vancouver, British Columbia, about 633 statute miles from the Prinsendam. It would take many hours for the Mellon to get there.

So an SOS was recommended by the USCG.

Disastrous Conditions

In October, the waters in the Gulf of Alaska are about 55 degrees F. At that temperature, a person in excellent health might last an hour. An older person, however, enjoying the fruits of his labor on a luxury cruise ship like the Prinsendam, might last half that time.

Even more challenging was that the remnants of Typhoon Vernon were not too far off in the Pacific and could be moving



Photo C. Upon hearing the Prinsendam's Morse SOS, the supertanker Williamsburgh turned around and sped toward the crippled ship. (Courtesy of N1EA)

into the Prinsendam's area in about eight hours.

The Williamsburgh to the Rescue

About 30 minutes after the first urgent XXX message had been sent to the USCG, Radio Officer van der Zee on the Prinsendam discretely sent a CW distress auto alarm and SOS message on 500 KHz — the international maritime distress and calling frequency. The sig-

nal was picked up by many operators, including the Radio Officers on the supertanker Williamsburgh: David Ring and Jim Pfister, now N1EA and NS1L respectively.

The Williamsburgh, a 1,200-foot-long oil tanker, has the maritime callsign WGOA. When Ring and Pfister heard the SOS, they were 104 statute miles from the Prinsendam. The tanker had been loaded with 1.5 million barrels of crude oil in Valdez and was on its way to a refinery in Texas.



Photo D. Passengers and crew filled the Prinsendam's lifeboats, dropped into the icy waters of the Gulf of Alaska, and floated near the ship waiting for help to arrive. (Courtesy of N1EA)



Photo E. David Ring, N1EA's, QSL card is an artist's rendering of the Prinsendam pitching over. (Courtesy of N1EA)

Upon hearing the Morse Code SOS, the Williamsburgh, **Photo C**, turned around and sped toward the Prinsendam.

(**NOTE:** van der Zee did not admit to secretly sending an SOS until shortly before his death — fearing he might lose his radio officer's license for disobeying the Prinsendam's Master. — KCØCCR)

Prinsendam: Abandon Ship

By 0630, conditions on the Prinsendam had deteriorated to the point that the Master ordered the vessel abandoned. The passengers and crew filled the lifeboats, dropped into the icy waters of the Gulf of Alaska, and floated near the ship waiting for help to arrive, **Photo D**. Fifteen passengers and 25 crewmembers, however, remained aboard the Prinsendam.

During the SOS transmissions and during the ensuing rescue operations, the satellite communications system on the Prinsendam failed. SSB and VHF-FM voice calls didn't seem to attract much attention either.

A 2-kW SSB signal on the international voice distress frequency, 2182 kHz, resulted in only one new response. The ship's main transmitter, a 500-watt double-sideband 400-Hz amplitude modulated signal (keyed A2), and its 40-watt battery-powered Morse transmitter and receiver didn't fail. It certainly attracted attention.

Operators as far away as New Zealand logged the CW SOS. Most importantly, it was heard by N1EA, **Photo E**, and NS1L on the Williamsburgh.

At 0745 the Williamsburgh reached the Prinsendam. Immediately, some of the crew and passengers in the lifeboats were picked up by a USCG helicopter, which had arrived at the scene, as well. From the boats, they transferred by helicopter to the deck of the waiting Williamsburgh. Crew and passengers in lifeboats were also picked up directly by the Williamsburgh.

Other Ships Arrive

In the mid-afternoon, the Coast Guard Cutter Boutwell arrived and assisted with rescue operations. It had been docked in Juneau to help celebrate the town's centennial. When it was learned the Prinsendam was in danger, the Juneau Fire Department was called out by the Coast Guard and in short order had rounded up members of the Boutwell's crew, who were variously enjoying liberty at some of the bars and restaurants in town. With all due speed, they then headed for the Prinsendam — about 345 miles away.

Passengers and crew in poor condition were transferred to the Boutwell and taken to the hospital in Sitka, on the coast of Alaska just south of Juneau.

The Mellon arrived at the scene at 1830, about 12 hours after the order was given to abandon the Prinsendam. Upon arrival, a medical team boarded the Prinsendam to provide medical assistance to those remaining on ship. However, at 2100 it was noted that 20

passengers and two U.S. Air Force parachute-rescue swimmers (PJs) were not accounted for.

They were apparently missing at sea in one of the Prinsendam's lifeboats. Fortunately, Radio Officer Carl Williams on the nearby SOHIO Intrepid picked up the PJs' battery-powered emergency beacon (ELT) and notified the USCG by Morse.

At 0100 the next morning, the

Boutwell spotted a flare. It was from the missing lifeboat. Everyone from the Prinsendam had now been accounted for.

The Measure of Success

Not one soul had been lost or seriously injured. On October 11, 1980, the Prinsendam capsized and sank 8,820 feet to the sea's floor.

CBS reporter Susan Spencer interviewed David Ring and others in Valdez, Alaska on October 6. Several accounts were recounted in books and magazines: <<http://bit.ly/MhDwUH>>, **Photo F**.

In 1998, Ring and Pfister were awarded the "Marconi Gold Medal" for their work during the rescue of the Prinsendam. When the Queen of the Netherlands heard about the heroics of Chief Radio Officer Jack van der Zee — even risking imprisonment to save the lives of the people — she made plans to Knight him for life. Unfortunately Jack passed away before he could be honored.

CW Is 'So Cool'

N1EA and NS1L are each active on the CW amateur radio bands, and perhaps you can work them or visit their QRZ.com entries.

I know that the families and friends of 524 people aboard the Prinsendam, **Photo G**, are grateful the duo was listening for CW signals on 500 KHz that night.

And to think, I wouldn't have known any of this until I made that CW QSO with N1EA on March 24, 2012 at 1800 UTC. *CW is so cool.*

(**NOTE:** Many thanks to David Ring, N1EA, for his help in preparation of this article. – KC0CCR)

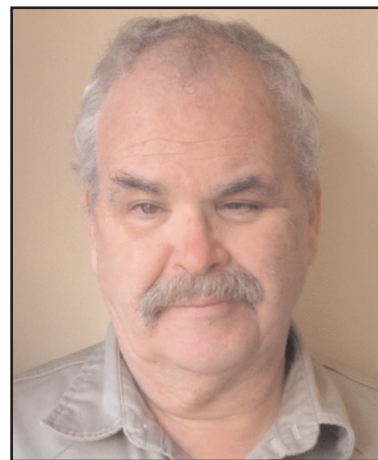


Photo H. David Ring, N1EA, shown here, and Jim Pfister, NS1L, "are each active on the CW amateur radio bands," KC0CCR writes, "and perhaps you can work them or visit their QRZ.com entries." (Courtesy of N1EA)



Photo F. The rescue of the crew and passengers of the Prinsendam was the focus of an August 1981 article in *Popular Mechanics* magazine (Courtesy of K16SN)



Photo G. Watch the launch of the early 1970s launch of the MS Prinsendam in this YouTube video, <<http://bit.ly/MIShMM>>. (YouTube screen grab)