

## Blood, sweat and tears in the South China Sea

It's strange how bloody a head wound can be. One of the divers doesn't bend down in time when he is lifted from the water and collides with an iron bar on deck. For a moment things get hectic on board. Some people bring disinfectants in a hurry, a towel, water and cameras, of course, for such a bloodstained head makes a nice picture. The irregularly shaped, six centimetres long scar reminds the diver forever of a memorable search expedition for submarine HMS K-XVI.



For your further information:

Watch out!

A few years ago relatives of crew members of submarines that went missing in World War II started making plans to try and find the locations of the three submarines that were still missing. Two of them, O-20 and K-XVI, perished in the South China Sea, the third, O-13, is in the North Sea. Their efforts resulted in finding the O-20 on 12th June 2002. They salvaged the deck telephone of the O-20 for identification purposes, and handed it over to the Submarine Service. It is kept there among other pieces of evidence as a tribute to the crew members of the lost submarines. A search expedition for the K-XVI took place from 9th to 20th May 2003. My daughters Claire and Jessica, and I, joined the expedition to try and find our father and grandfather Willem Blom, and I would like to give a personal impression of our experiences.

On arrival in the harbour of Kuching, Borneo, we board the Mata Ikan, a solid 22 meter no frills ship, after some delay due to SARS checks. Michael Lim, the owner from Singapore, and Martin - both experienced deep sea divers - are already on board, as well as the owner's wife, who is a software engineer and will play an important role in analysing the measurement results from the equipment. And there is a crew of six Indonesians.

Our Dutch party consists of seven experienced scuba divers (the eighth has been admitted to hospital just before our departure), among them a cameraman for the documentary film we are going to make, and my daughters Claire and Jessica, and I.

We have agreed on the outset that we will try not to get in the way, and not to be overanxious about one another. So our motto is "Klaas is the boss". Klaas Brouwer, the leader of the expedition, is a captain with KLM and president of the International Association for Handicapped Divers, among many other activities. He has a natural authority and is an admirably efficient leader. The other divers, too, have an air of calmness and professionalism about them, and we feel at home and at ease with them in no time. We are admitted into the team as a matter of course, and there is some good-humoured mutual teasing. Especially my somewhat voluminous suitcase is subject of hilarity. Later it turns out that almost its complete content comes in very handy on various occasions.

Regardless how hard we all work, I experience life on board as extraordinarily relaxing. After 24 hours it feels like I have never lived otherwise. One afternoon Sonja Brouwer and I are on deck looking out over the sea.

Sonja is a diving instructor and has an extremely keen sight. That is why she is often on the look-out.

Nearby we see that one of the crew members is wiping his plate with a nondescript cloth; then he cleans part of the deck with it, and wipes his mug with it. Sonja and I look at each other and we are more astonished than alarmed.

Total acquiescence has come upon us. But that night at dinner I catch myself watching the tableware with a healthy suspicion. No problem, you can eat the lobster, which you caught yourself, with your hands perfectly well.



Klaas Brouwer and Jessica Boonstra on their way to the Mata Ikan

Some days later the water from the tap gets more and more turbid (we have probably taken too many showers). And due to the unusually bad weather some barrels of water and some bottles of drinking water fall overboard. I try and imagine how this would be during a war.

Every day hunger, threat of disease, death, execution, enemies everywhere and not knowing when it is going to end. I feel ashamed of the decadent attitude with which I take clean water, comfort and security for granted.

We intend on the first day, on our way to the diving location, to dive at a ship's wreck nearby to try out our equipment, magnetometer, side-scan sonar and front-scan sonar on a well-known ship. It turns out to be the wreck of the Katori Maru, a Japanese freighter which was torpedoed in 1941 by the K-XVI commanded by Van Well Groeneveld.

It's my first dive in open water and I try to concentrate on my breathing, and, floating near the wreck, I realise how strange it is that I am looking for my father's ship on this very spot. These men, too, then the enemy, had relatives who mourned for them.

Then we sail on to a location where fishermen say that they lose their nets. It is on the way to the location of K-XVI pointed out by Japan. But after some dives we decide that there are too few leads, and we sail on to our original destination. There we examine the area with side-scan sonar. Unfortunately the

magnetometer has broken down and cannot be used anymore. The sonars are monitored in shifts and we dive in some places.

During a break my daughters have also made a dive, but they have not surfaced on the agreed time. There is some controlled unrest and a search plan is quickly drawn up. Strangely enough I am not worried at all. The girls are not alone; they have been in dire straits before and will not lose their heads. Only later, back in The Netherlands, when I heard about a fatal diving accident, I realised how naive I had been.

Some days later four - very experienced - divers get into trouble and they drift away with the strong current. We cannot hoist anchor quickly - in order to pick them up - as it is damaged in the storm in the previous night. My heart stands still and I wonder if the price for this expedition is not going to be too high. The victims themselves turn out to be very stoic about the event. Roy, who lost a leg during his air force service, is joking about sharks and artificial limbs, and his only problem is the sun burning on his head. The others are not impressed either. I try to imagine how the situation must have been for quartermaster de Wolf, who kept himself floating in the water for over 35 hours after the O-16 had perished. He was carried with the current and in the end he was the only survivor of the O-16. How lonely he must have been that night, and what an awesome man he must have been.

Hans Besançon, the driving force behind the search expedition, had received information from Japan as to the probable location of the K-XVI. The crew members tell us that we should make an offering to the sea in order to find the ship. If you want to retrieve something from the sea you must give something in return. We think that is a wonderful idea, and my daughters ask the cook to scoop out a coconut so that we can put our offerings in; an apple, some jewellery of the girls and my beloved pocket knife which had once belonged to my mother. Later I throw some coins, as superstition orders.

I ask the crew of K-XVI and the gods of the sea to help us find the boat; the crew of the Mata Ikan sing a song during this beautiful small ritual. We are convinced that this will help us and carry on, but a few hours later a tremendous storm rises and apparently we have done something wrong.

That night the dinghy gets under the ship and is damaged, and the next night we are warned that a typhoon is on its way to us. A freighter nearby has capsized and we are asked to look out for survivors.



Willem Blom

We are advised to get out of harm's way as fast as possible. On top of that crew members of some fishing boats that we contacted and who have been fishing here for months tell us that there are no obstacles that tear up their nets. After spending a day in the shelter of the

harbour and taking barrels of fresh water on board we sail back to the location where we had found debris before, at a depth of 50 meters. One of the divers loses sight of the others due to the murky water and strong current, and he surfaces full of excitement.



Final check before diving

The underwater film shows a 12 meter high structure, entangled in nets, looking like a tower and periscope. Other divers find steel plates, an anchor chain and an anchor, and something that might be a rudder. We are euphoric and phone the Royal Navy to check sizes and shapes. Later it will turn out that we have cheered too early and that there is no tower in the nets. Still other finds show that we cannot eliminate the possibility that in fact we did find the K-XVI. Due to the bad weather, the strong current and limited time left we cannot get enough evidence, but there are sufficient leads. A next search expedition is being prepared. We will keep you posted.

For more information and pictures see website:  
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