Summary

The isle of Terschelling is part of the European ‘Wadden’-area, characterised by a shallow, tidal sea, between the (Dutch and German) Frysian mainland and a row of offshore islands. These ‘Wadden’-islands originate from a long line of beaches, washed up by waves and tides, running roughly parallel to the mainland’s coast, with a soggy area of peat bogs and salt marches in between. This elongated offshore beach got its final form in the middle ages when floods breached through in various places, creating a system of dry banks and deep tidal inlets. Dunes formed in dry places and new waves of floods swamped the saltings, creating in the process the Waddenzee. Thus evolved a dynamic tidal area with abundant wildlife and vegetation. Humans presumably appeared on Terschelling in the first centuries PD. Traditional dialects suggest these early settlers came from the Frysian coastal mainland. In the Middle Ages the isle passed into the ownership of the Counts of Holland, while the natives kept their relative independence. When the Netherlands became part of the Napoleonic empire, Terschelling was made an administrative part of the province of Friesland, from 1806 until 1814, but afterwards became a part of the province of Noord Holland. In 1942 the German occupying forces shifted the isle’s administration to Friesland again, to which it still belongs.

The men from Terschelling have, for centuries, worked mainly at sea, in the merchant marine, various fisheries and whaling. They could often be found on the trade routes to the Dutch East Indies and West Indies, and the Baltic. Besides these activities, men from Terschelling were also farmers. For centuries they had only the choice between sailor and farmer. The French occupation with Napoleon’s Continental System and consequently the war with Britain, strangled Dutch seatrade, which after 1813 took many years to revive. Quite a few Terschellinger merchant mariners became fishermen or farmers. This negative tide was reversed, however, with establishment of the nautical college in 1875. Especially when the Dutch shipping industry revived in the wake of the general liberalisation of world trade in the 1850s, the nautical college proved instrumental in making the island a major supplier of officers for the Dutch merchant marine. In the same era, the merchant fleet changed from sail to steam, which made voyages more predictable and faster. Shore leaves were made shorter as well, though, so that many families moved to cities such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam, where the big shipowners had their homeports.

The First World War had few negative consequences for the island; rather, strong demand for ships and sailors kept the maritime labour market humming. The world’s economic Depression after 1928, however, forced many Terschellinger sailors out of a job. At the same time the local fisheries were seriously hurt by competition from steam trawlers, mostly working from Ijmuiden and Den Helder, which dwarfed the native sailing blazers’ catching capacity. The isle lost much of its population, when, in the wake of this economic ebb, many men looked for jobs ashore: in 1933 Terschelling boasted over 460 mariners; by 1939 there were less than half. Yet, in the early half of the 20th century, towage, salvage and shell gathering gave a new stimulus to maritime activities on the island. The ferry service to Harlingen grew rapidly after 1934, when the Afsluitdijk across the Zuiderzee was closed, thus providing a fast road link with the populous provinces of Holland.

Despite increased tourism, the ‘islander mood’ remained special to Terschelling as well as to the other Wadden islands. Islanders form strong communities, where freedom, hard work and harmony with the environment are defining factors. Once born on Terschelling, one remains a ‘Terschellinger’, wherever one may end up on the globe. In early days, the perils of the sea caused the emergence of a remarkable number of charities, to help bereaved dependants. Major
surviving charities are the Dirk Mentz Fonds, the Willem Barentsz Fonds and the sailors’ insurer ‘De Buul’.

In the 1930s Terschelling suffered growing unemployment, although re-allotment helped to boost the number of agricultural jobs from 1938. As elsewhere in the Netherlands, the Great Depression made people susceptible to national-socialism, as propagated by the notorious National Socialist Bond (NSB). In the 1935 elections, the Terschelling NSB won 7% of votes, just 1% below the national average. In 1937 and 1939 the fascist party had lost much of its appeal, nationally as well as on the isle. With, in August 1939, the Second World War looming, general mobilization brought a sizeable military detachment on the island, only to be demobilized after the Dutch surrender. A German occupation garrison arrived in 1940 on May 16th. During the War their strength varied from 1000 to 2200.

The island’s relative isolation taught natives and occupying forces to co-exist along rather peacefully. Quite a few restrictions were increasingly irritating, though: beach and dunes – a dominating part of the island’s territory – were declared prohibited area and no one could leave the island without permission from the German authorities. Tourists were no longer allowed, the maritime academy’s building was commandeered and its courses moved ashore. Such actions severely damaged the local economy. Since Terschelling was part of the Atlantikwall, the island was soon bustling with bunker building activities. Also other military buildings and installations were erected, especially for tracking Allied aircraft. The bustle brought 600 temporary workers from the shore and also the island’s men were deployed, initially voluntarily. From 1942, however, the natives were forced to work for the Germans, or face the Arbeitseinsatz and possible deportation to Germany. Deputy food-supply commissioner A. Hibma was landed with the job of coordinating work for the occupying forces.

Early 1942 burgomaster J.A.H. Rijnders and two aldermen were replaced by J. Bakker and two fellow NSB aldermen. By 1944 the situation worsened, when, among other complaints, the occupation authorities no longer took into account the needs of farming, when requisitioning forced labour. On August 24th 1944 some 150 men were arrested in a big razzia, which, however, had no serious consequences, thanks to intervention by a former Inselkommandant (island commander). During the last winter of the War, better known ashore as the ‘hunger winter’, German rule became harsher, although food distribution, Mr Hibma’s province, remained well organized. Supplies of meat, vegetables and dairy products were sufficient during the entire War period. In order to supply the population’s rations, Hibma organised a number of egg gathering expeditions on the Boschplaat - the area of dunes and saltings on the island’s eastern half - and later also on Griend - a small isle, teeming with birds, south of Terschelling. Hibma also tried to reserve the produce of the island’s decoys for the natives, which, however, was largely thwarted by the Germans.

The island’s isolation and the German military’s omnipresence gave Terschelling’s resistance movement a plodding start. By August 1943 two resistance groups were formed, without knowing it from each other. They soon merged but did not manage to fire a shot in anger. After operation ‘Overlord’, the Allied invasions in Normandy from June 6th 1944, the group held military drills, but only in winter 1944-1945 genuine weapons arrived. Early 1945 the group was transformed to become district XI of the Nederlandsche Binnenlandsche Strijdkrachten (NBS, or Dutch national forces). After the German surrender they patrolled the island, although the remaining Germans frustrated this were they could.

Living together in a confined piece of terra firma, islanders and Germans were condemned to each other; it was in both groups’ interest to coexist as peacefully as possible. There was also
outright collaboration, with 20 fascists, mainly NSB-members, on the island. After the war such people have been tried under a special law ('Bijzondere Rechtspleging'). Like the other Wadden islands, Terschelling was liberated relatively late: their priority was low, in the eyes of Allied commanders, while the Germans preferred to see their complete surrender as merely an armistice. Only on May 29th 1945 British troops arrived to disarm the Germans and it took until June 6th before the last were carried off. Especially in these last weeks tensions ran high between islanders and occupiers. The war’s total death toll on Terschelling included: five civilians of Jewish origin, all deported and murdered in concentration camps; a farmer, in a fight with a German soldier; a 17 years old korfball player, accidentally killed in a British air raid; and a former mate in the merchant marine, executed when the Germans rounded up his resistance group in Groningen. Elsewhere in the world 22 people hailing from Terschelling were killed in various circumstances. As elsewhere after the war, rebuilding took off with gusto. Some former collaborators markedly took the lead in developing tourist facilities. This aroused animosity amongst many islanders, but still laid the foundation for modern Terschelling’s economy. In the 1950s, the tidal wave of tourism increased rapidly. In 1956 a new ferry with unprecedented passenger carrying capacity was launched, and with it a new future for the island dawned.

When the Second World War broke out, nearly 850 of the Dutch merchant marine’s 1,100 vessels were at sea, manned by some 12,500 Dutch sailors, while another 6,000 Dutch sailed in foreign ships. Vessels holed up in the Netherlands when the Germans invaded, were requisitioned by the nazis. Virtually all vessels that had managed to escape this fate, served the Allied war effort. The crews, conscripted for naval service, lived for five years in virtually constant danger of a violent death, an experience quite similar to what front soldiers went through. Although the armament of merchant ships improved during the war, they were barely a match for submarines, surface warships and military aircraft. The Dutch merchant navy was especially active in logistic operations, such as fleet supply and transport of troops, and sailed world wide, to and from the United Kingdom, the United States and Africa. By late 1943, Hitler’s ill-famed U-boats began to lose their naval supremacy in the face of the convoy system, the US’s mass production of naval ‘destroyer escorts’ and merchant ‘Liberty’ and ‘Victory’ vessels, deployment of long range patrol aircraft and the further development of radar. Some 180 men from Terschelling were in the Dutch Royal Navy and merchant marine during the war; 40 of them were killed in action, as were three non-combatants from Terschelling. They did comparatively slightly worse than the total of 18,500 Dutch sailors, 3,600 of whom perished. The Dutch merchant fleet was virtually halved by hostilities. During the war, various initiatives were launched to help sailors and their households in the Netherlands. In London, the Prinses Margriet Fund was established, concentrating on social support of seamen and their families back home. When in 1941 the Germans ordered to sharply reduce the share of the sailors’ wages that was paid to their wives, the banker Walraven van Hall stepped in with the - illegal - ‘Zee manspot’ fund. Van Hall also established the National Steunfonds (national relieve fund) in support of those who lost their jobs or were arrested, and also for helping Jews in hiding, families of military personnel abroad and participants in the Great Railway Strike. This strike was prematurely called by the Dutch government in London exile in 1944, ostensibly to help the Allies free the country. Both funds owed their mushrooming wealth to creative accounting. The otherwise perfectly respectable banker Walraven van Hall and his brother Gijs - who took over when Walraven was executed in February 1945 and was to become lord-mayor of Amsterdam - proved themselves most accomplished swindlers, so that they could
also cough up for other resistance activities. After the war the ‘Prinses Margriet’ Fund continued its activities in the Netherlands, supporting families of mariners who had perished during the war. For seamen who came back alive, the government introduced a number of social laws, such as compensation, with retrospective effect, for sailing days during the war, paid by government and shipowners. The ‘Buitengewoon Pensioen Zeelieden-oorlogsslachtoffers’ (extra-ordinary pension for maritime war victims) was created for bereaved dependants and disabled sailors.

The merchant marine’s wartime travails received only limited attention at home, where the punters were more concerned with their own suffering under occupation and, after 1945, with reconstruction, than with the martial perils of the seas, far from their own shores. This lack of recognition as well as the government’s weird policy concerning decorations, which was strongly biased towards the military, and the mean sailing days compensation, caused much bitterness among mariners. Many felt utterly let down by the very people they had slaved so hard for to free.