**‘Below the Line the Devil Reigns’: Death and Dissent aboard a VOC Vessel.**

This article is a case study of a particularly deadly journey made by the VOC ship the *Loenderveen* in 1732. This pertains to our research question about mortality risks of different ranks, showing tensions aboard VOC ships between sailors and soldiers and gives insight into the working conditions aboard VOC ships. Tensions aboard between Dutch soldiers and German sailors (that usually only spoke High German) may have contributed to making certain groups more vulnerable.

Mortality risks amongst ranks

Working conditions

Tensions between ranks

This voyage has gone down in history as one of the deadliest voyages, with a mortality rate of 35% instead of the average of 8%. A large number of deaths was due to scurvy, especially amongst lower-ranking sailors & soldiers, although some officers also succumbed. The timing of the voyage is partly to blame; the *Loenderveen* was part of the Easter Fleet, which was always at risk of being stuck in doldrums between Cape Verde and the Cape of Good Hope, lengthening the journey and increasing the risk of running out of produce and fresh water. This was well known to the Company, yet voyages at this time still continued. The timing of this journey also worsened the risk of scurvy, for recruits were often already weakened & malnourished by harsh European winters — and malnourishment leads to scurvy.

This may be one of the reasons lower ranking sailors and soldiers were more likely to die.Higher ranking members and officers were paid more, and thus could more comfortably get through winter, whereas lower ranking members were more likely to live in poverty. Due to the risks associated with VOC journeys, wealthier, and thus healthier, people were also less willing to sign up, leaving people who were already in bad physical shape (Bruijn et al., 1979). In this way, mortality risk does correlate with rank — but is mediated by the pre-existing health of the crew.

After the *Loenderveen* had gotten out of the doldrums, they quickly sailed for land; they steered for nearby Saldanha Bay instead of the Cape. This is because, although the causes for scurvy were not fully understood, it was understood that scurvy could be cured by landing ashore. Sending a missive to the Governor of the Cape, he was informed that 51crew members had died and most of everyone else was very sick. It is presumed the Governor must have been relieved that the ship had not gone missing, for his superiors in the Company were usually more concerned with its ships and their material contents.

The Governor also received a message from the ship's surgeon, that stated that the sickness & death aboard had been expedited by maltreatment from the maltreatment by the first mate van Oorelien. Violence aboard VOC vessels was not unusual, for physical punishment was used to maintain order and was considered normal. Officers could strike, whip or — in extreme cases — even execute subordinates. That being said, punishment aboard was supposed to be bound to certain rules and customs. For example, one could not strike someone’s head, for this was an affront on their honour.

However, van Oorelien had assaulted fellow officers, which was a big taboo, because it undermined the order of rank and hierarchy. His beatings also exceeded disciplinary norms and seemed arbitrary, breeding fear and resentment. He dishonoured and humiliated his victims publicly. He was also accused of being blasphemous and invoking the devil, which was especially incendiary when performed by officers, believed to endanger the ship. This would scare the crew members, especially inexperienced ones — such as soldiers who were mostly from inland Germany and thus not used to the sea.

The evidence in the case against van Oorelien seemed damning — until nine witnesses spoke up in his favour. This group differed from the majority of the crewmen: seven of them were soldiers, and only one was Dutch. This points to divisions on board; the majority of soldiers on all VOC vessels were from inland Germany, with no previous experience of sailing. Rivalry and tensions between these groups were widespread in the VOC.

This group brought their own complaints against van Oorelien’s main accuser: another officer, Du Bois. They reported that, amongst other instances of unsanctioned, although not-overly-violent punishments, they had been hit for not pumping fast enough. This was particularly offensive, since the soldiers were helping out by working on the pumps, because sickness and death had caused a shortage of manpower. Du Bois was also accused of uttering blasphemous words to the soldiers. Blasphemy would frighten every soldier, but especially when spoken to inexperienced soldiers crossing the equator for the first time on a ship riddled with a gruesome sickness — symptoms of scurvy are very gnarly — and death.

Eventually, both van Oorelien and Du Bois were punished and not allowed to continue on their journey towards Asia. Van Oorelien was sent home and never allowed to work on a VOC ship again. Du Bois was similarly sent home, although he was allowed to — and did — return to work for the VOC.

**Sources:**

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