

# VASTWERKEN



## Officieel orgaan van de AVOM

Algemene Vereniging Oud-personeel van de Koninklijke Marine



De Koninklijke Marine wordt in 2011 vernieuwd. Het tweede patrouilleschip van de Koninklijke Marine: Hr.Ms. Zeeland P841 werd op 20 november j.l. gedoopt door Karla Peijs, commissaris van de Koningin in Zeeland. De ceremonie vond plaats op de scheepswerf Damen Schelde Naval Shipbuilding in Vlissingen. De vier nieuwe patrouilleschepen van de Holland klasse worden in 2011 en 2012 indienst gesteld.



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# Peter Sterkenburg: A maritime painter who became world-famous in the North

When I visited Aron de Vries (MA/Msc) - member of the Advisory Board of the AVOM - for an interview in August 2009, I noticed a painting of a naval vessel in the living room. The painting was by Peter J. Sterkenburg, unknown to me until then, and the ship was 'Her Majesty's Johan Maurits van Nassau'. The painting in the living room, however, was a print; the original, an oil on linen 70x110 cm was owned by F.W. van Gelder (LL.M). My interest was aroused, also because Aron drew my attention to the versatility of the painter and the maritime work he had made. After Peter Sterkenburg passed away in 2000, the 'Peter J. Sterkenburg Maritime Paintings Foundation' was established in 2001 with the aim of bringing the work of this Frisian artist, who died at the early age of 44, to the attention of a large public. As De Vries was a member of this foundation, he referred me to the man who knew 'everything about him', Ton van der Werf.



Her Majesty's Johan Maurits van Nassau. [Oil on canvas, 70x110 cm, painted in 1998. Collection F.W. van Gelder (LL.M) ]

That is why I visited Ton van der Werf in the spring of 2010 and was not only impressed by the beautiful paintings that Peter had painted on canvas, but also by the life of the man himself. Exactly 55 years ago that story began with the birth of Peter, on December 15th, 1955 in Harlingen. As a boy he was already fascinated by the sea in this Frisian harbour town and looked at the coming and going of ships with great interest.



Peter Sterkenburg

He inherited the love for the sea from his father, Joost Joshua, who was a sailor, an officer in the merchant navy. And he also acquired the drawing talent of his father. His father's stories when he returned home, in which the sea always played the leading role, were the highlights of Peter's childhood. Father Sterkenburg, however, got tired of being separated from his family for many months and decided to stay ashore. The family moved to Haamstede, but shortly after the death of Joost, Peter's father, his mother Ans returned to Friesland. Of the little money from the insurance she bought a house in Franeker where Peter would spend much of his childhood. He turned out to be 'something else'! He rarely, if ever, did his homework, but passed certain difficult subjects seemingly without any effort.

In addition to his drawing talents, he also proved to have talent for trade as a coin and stamp collector. In addition to his drawing talents, he also showed to have talent for trading. By dealing in coins and stamps he could pay for his hobby for expensive cars. Peter was drafted into the army and served with the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion in Havelte. Also there, he got on the nerves of his commanding officers, which is why they gave him some painting assignments.

"He became the Netherlands first and only battalion painter," claims one of his friends. As a great admirer of Carel Willink and Salvador Dali, he tried painting some surrealist works himself and wanted to go to the Art Academy, but was discouraged. He was told that there was no money to be made in art. Despite the discouraging comments he went to the Academy Ubbo Emmius in Leeuwarden, but that was not a success. In the eighties his life changed.

He moved to Zurich (near Harlingen) and there, in a cottage behind the dike with meadows in front and behind of the house, he turned his life around. Peter painted to his heart's content. At that time, art dealer Aard Koster discovered Peter when he noticed one of his canvases in the Takema Gallery in Harlingen. He visited the painter in his white-washed house and told him to make whatever he wanted.

The first painting turned out to be a winter landscape, and as far as we know the only one he ever made. In 1985 Koster decided to organize an exhibition of Peter's work for the first time. "Because of his connection to the sea, he is a painter who makes seascapes his favorite subjects," the art dealer wrote in the catalog.



Crests of waves. [Oil on canvas, 70x100 cm. Painted in 1985. Collection André van Nimwegen].

Of the 40 exhibited works, 35 were sold. Over the years, prices rose, in the beginning his works would cost about 250 guilders, but later on people were willing to pay 2500 and sometimes even 4000 guilders. Some saw him as the greatest maritime painter of the 20th century. Peter made about 40 canvases a year. In the meantime he had chosen for a career as a realistic painter. That was not the easiest way," he said, as "you have to be really good, because if you are not, you will quickly be forgotten. In abstract art, someone can very well hide their incompetence.

# famous in the North.

" He made no secret of his own methods. "I document myself as much as possible for an assignment. All details have to be correct and I make a lot of sketches and photos beforehand.

Then, I try to imagine what the ship would look like if you passed it in a small boat." However Peter made a mistake by thinking that he could, quietly and undisturbed, continue to produce paintings for the rest of his life because on the other side of the world lived a man who, as a kind of Maecenas, would give the career of the tall Frisian painter a new direction.



**Hongs of Canton.** [Oil on canvas, 70x120 cm. Painted in 1999. [Private collection].

It was his first international exhibition. His name was established and Peter was very happy with the new twist to his career. Other exhibitions followed in Jakarta, Sydney, etc. In his own country, the great turning point in Peter's career finally took place in 1998.

He received major commissions, including four paintings with scenes from the Second World War for the Maritime Heritage Foundation in Den Helder. The Holland America Line wanted to have a seven-meter-long painting for its new cruise ship, the "Amsterdam". This painting depicting VOC-ships in the 17th century was the largest he ever made. But even if our painter was doing well in that respect, he did have setbacks. His father had died at the age of 36 and in 1998 his stepfather, to whom his mother married in 1983, died suddenly followed in 2000 by his brother Rob, only 41 years old. Peter's sister convinced him to get a medical check-up because she feared that he had a much too high blood pressure. He was given special medicines, but his friends remained worried.

He was behind schedule with the large painting for the HAL and he looked pale perhaps caused by the pressure. The day before Easter, he called his mother that he was not feeling well, but believed it was a cold.

The next day he appeared to have died. The blow turned out to be too much for his mother. She died the following day. In Peter Sterkenburg's studio in Zurich stood, next to a table full of tubes of paint, cans and an empty coke bottle, an easel with an unfinished work: the first vague lines of what should have become a painting of Elmina Castle in Ghana. That canvas would have become one of more than a thousand works that Peter painted over the years, a rich production for a painter who undoubtedly lives on in the memory of many. Not only because of his beautiful work as an artist and craftsman, but also as a person, brother and friend.

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**Restless ocean.** [Oil on canvas, 90x110 cm. Painted in 1992. Collection Jean Chang].

Ton van der Werf, a youthful pensioner since 2000, but at the time director of KLM in Hong Kong, alerted his wife to a painting of a sailing ship in an art gallery in Rotterdam that was so strikingly painted that it seemed as if "the clouds were moving, the water was alive and the wind swept the sails." The canvas in question had already been sold, but Van der Werf bought another one depicting a tjalk-boat, followed later by a bom-ship.

At that time, KLM Hong Kong invited prominent Dutch artists to exhibit in Hong Kong every year. Van der Werf felt that Peter's work was ideal for this purpose. However he was quickly disappointed because Peter was not interested because he painted for a living and depended on the income. Ton promised him a monthly fee if he would make 20 paintings. In the end, Peter's sister Femke convinced him accept the invitation and go to Hong Kong. An important part of the agreement was that Sterkenburg would make a large canvas of the port of Amsterdam in the 17th century, but also some paintings of the harbour of Hong Kong. Peter then flew to Hong Kong to make preparational sketches.



**Dutch East Indiamen before Amsterdam.** [Oil on canvas, 100x180 cm. Painted in 1998. Collection Société Européenne de Banque, Luxembourg].

A thank you to Ton van der Werf, who gave us permission to briefly copy the story of Peter Sterkenburg's life from the book "Bound to the sea, Peter J. Sterkenburg, a maritime painter (1955-2000)". Published by the Peter J. Sterkenburg Maritime Paintings Foundation. A second edition of this fine book was published in 2003.