

## Travel Report “Lighten Up!” Christmas Visit 2019 - Philippines/Singapore/Indonesia/Bangladesh November 23 – December 24, 2019

“There’s a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” This wonderful line comes from Leonard Cohen. His songs are able, in my experience, to turn a simple karaoke track into a very meaningful get-together. Christmas is all about light. From November 23 till December 24, I travelled throughout South-East Asia for my “Lighten Up!” Christmas visit for Royal Van Oord DMC and Royal Boskalis Westminster. It was an extensive visit with many highlights.



### Philippines, November 23 – December 13

My visit starts in The Philippines, where I have different activities scheduled:

#### 1. Christmas parties

I have the privilege to attend three Christmas parties. The first one is of Boskalis. Although not everyone was able to come, due to typhoon Tisoy, the place is packed with people. Speeches, good food, awards, games, raffles, and a karaoke contest create a great atmosphere. I take care of the opening prayer, a story about a father, a daughter and angels.

A week later, I may join the Sodexo Van Oord Christmas Party. It’s the first time for me to attend this event, where I meet the cooks and stewards. This gathering is also great fun, with a “Western” touch.

One day later, I may also open the general Van Oord Christmas party with prayer. After I tell the story, we sing together “Ama namin”, the Lord’s Prayer in Tagalog. This magical party ends with a lot of people on the dance floor. All in all, these events are really great for re-connecting and bonding. The dredging companies show that they care for their employees.



#### 2. Personal visits

I visit different seafarers at home, which gives me a sense of what life in The Philippines is all about. Especially two visits are very important: one AB in Iloilo, and one welder in Batangas city, who are both not able to work at sea anymore. During these visits, I try to give some spiritual support: we talk about life going on and new perspectives. It is nice to meet their families as well.

#### 3. Seminars

Since a few years, port chaplain Helene Perfors and I teach some guest lectures at different maritime schools in The Netherlands. In addition, I have developed a cross cultural social skills seminar for Filipino seafarers. With a few simple steps, social and professional interaction at a vessel can receive quite a boost. One seminar is given to a class of cadets at the Philippines Merchant Marine Academy (PMMA) in Zambales. Another seminar is given to a group of seafarers of different ranks at Wilhemsen-Smith Bell Manning in Makati. The last seminar is conducted with a big crowd of cadets, maritime students and high-school students at Manuel S. Enverga University in Lucena City. I get positive feedback from these events and several certificates of appreciation. Conducting these seminars also helps us to improve our guest lecture program for the Dutch maritime schools.



#### 4. SPWO partnership

The seminars were carried out in strong cooperation with our SPWO partner in The Philippines, pastor Rancho Villavicencio. SPWO and Seacoms Maritime Development International are working together in order to add value to the life of people working at sea and/or abroad. Apart from this cooperation, it is great to be able to attend some activities of pastor Rancho's church community: the annual Gift-giving & Feeding Event in Amadeo, Capite (also supported by the TSM Group), Sunday worship and an evening of fellowship&fun. Furthermore, we gather as SPWO-Seacoms delegation to evaluate our recent attendance of the ICMA conference in Taiwan.



#### 5. Maritime Welfare organizations

It is good to position our SPWO activities in the broader context of worldwide maritime welfare work. Therefore, I visit the local office of the Mission to Seafarers(MtS) in Manila. We talk about their "We Care" program, with a module about responsible use of Social Media in seafarer's lives. Since, I sometimes organize little seminars onboard, this might be a good topic for discussion. Moreover, I can refer crew members to the MtS online module to do a follow-up. In this way, maritime welfare organizations can support each other.

I also visit the Gig and the Amazing Sampaguita Foundation (GASFI), which has develop a bed-time reading program for seafarer's children. This year, they also organized the Seafarer Family International Congress (SFIC) which was held August 14 & 15 at the Manila Hotel. We talk about the results and future plans.

The Manila office of International Maritime Employers Council (IMEC) runs a program, where young people from a poor background can apply for a maritime education. I meet one of the coordinators, and we agree on a future seminar for the IMEC cadets at the Maritime Academy of Asia and the Pacific (MAAP) in Bataan.

*Summarizing:* three intense weeks in the Philippines, full of activities, either with direct or with indirect significance for the dredging companies. I think that both kinds of activities are meaningful. But after three weeks, it is time to move on to operations the work floor.

#### Batam, December 13-15

On December 13, I fly to Singapore and take the ferry to Batam Island. It has been raining in Singapore for almost a week, and in Batam the weather is not different. I sleep two nights on **CSD Artemis**, which is mobilizing for a project in India. At the first night, with part of the crew, I have a wonderful diner on shore. At the second evening, we have the Christmas prayer & communion meeting, together with crewmembers from the **HAM310**. It is the first time for a display of my "portable nativity scene" (acquired in Manila), which adds to the Christmas atmosphere. There's good singing and fellowship afterwards.



During the day, I visit the vessels in the yard, and I have a conversation and prayer in the VO yard office (which has become a kind of tradition as well). All in all, a short but sweet visit to Batam – connecting and re-connecting.

### Singapore, December 15-17

Back to Singapore in the morning: I report to the regional office of Boskalis Westminster. It is Sunday, so it is very quiet. With one of the worksmanagers, I plan my visits to the Pulau Tekong and TUAS projects. In the afternoon I visit the first part of the Tekong project, where spreader pontoon **MSP1** is connected to a pipeline. I have conversations with the Filipino day and night skipper, and with the Indian/Bangladeshi crewmembers. Around 9pm, a crew tender takes me back to the shore.



First thing, next day, is to bring my passport to the nearby travel agent (for my Indonesia visa). Then, a driver takes me to the area office and to the Pulau Tekong project office, where I have lunch with the project director and other staff members. In the afternoon, I can visit the other side of the Tekong site: an impressive reclamation area, which is developed according to a “polder model”. Transportation at the site is quite the challenge: different types of vehicles are used, together with speedboat transportation on the water. After a short visit at the site office, a speedboat takes me to backhoe **Oceanus** and spreader pontoon **Zeeotter**. At the Oceanus, I have Christmas meetings both with the day and night crews. I leave the Zeeotter together with the barge master, for this pontoon is not always accessible due to the tide. The night skipper of the Zeeotter helps me to visit the shore boosters **Energy 4, 5 and 6**. I have conversations with their operators. Somehow, night time visits are always a bit different from day time visits. Around midnight, I go back to the shore. It is amazing how many impressions one can get within a few hours.



Next day starts at the area office again: time to say goodbye, because I will leave for Indonesia at night time. Before my departure, however, I visit the TUAS Terminal Reclamation, Wharf Construction and Dredging Phase 2 Project. Last two years, I had been observing this project from hopper dredger Queen of the Netherlands, now I can visit it from the shore side. We drive till the end of the quay wall, so that I get a good overview of the reclamation area. Both the Tekong and Tuas projects are joint ventures with a Japanese partner – the set-up of the project-offices is therefore different from what I am used to so far: a big, quiet space where everyone is working together, instead of a compartmentalized space.

### Cilegon, December 17-19

At night time, I fly to Jakarta, which has a fairy-like look from above. A driver is waiting for me and takes me to Cilegon, where I stay overnight in a hotel. Next morning, I have a short meeting with most of the project staff during breakfast. After that, a project SHE-Q officer assists me to take a crew tender from a little fishing village next to the reclamation site. Via the multicat, I step on **TSHD Oranje**, where I stay one night on board. Last time I visited this dredger, was in 2016 – there are familiar faces and new crew members for me to meet. I also talk to two STC cadets, who attended my guest lectures in Rotterdam – very nice to see them taking this next step of their education.



While the Oranje is dredging, there is plenty of time to meet with everyone. At night time, we have the Christmas service, with one crewmember playing the piano, and impressive singing by the

Filipino crew. I have added “Silent Night” to the song list – it is hard to explain the feeling one can have while singing this old hymn together with a bunch of guys. After the service, we sit outside at deck – the temperature is beautiful.



Next morning, I get up early to meet the night crew. The replacements arrive, and I leave the vessel after lunch, together with the captain and chief-engineer. Unfortunately, the taxi-driver takes a wrong route, so I cannot pay a short visit to the project office anymore. But hopefully, there will be another opportunity for that in the future. At least, we are on time at the airport, which is not a certainty, when you know Jakarta traffic. I fly back to Singapore, where I spend a short night in an airport hotel.



### Matarbari, December 20-23

Next day, I fly via Bangkok to Dhaka, Bangladesh, and from there to Cox’s Bazar. Then, a speedboat (with armed guards) takes us to the Matarbari project site. Bangladesh is a delta country: water is everywhere and many fishing boats. When I arrive at the site, I am lucky: the informal end of the week meeting has just started, so it is easy to meet everyone. Moreover, karaoke singing always connects.



Next day, I meet some night shift people during breakfast. Then I am introduced to the project. A driver takes me from the main accommodation to the SMD office, where most of the Boskalis personnel is located. In Matarbari, Penta Ocean is constructing a new power plant. Boskalis is working on a section of the breakwater which will protect the bulk carriers sailing into the access channel. After the safety induction, we go to the jetty and take a speedboat to crane/accomodation barge **Pontramaris**. I meet the bargemaster and we arrange a Christmas meeting for early morning next day, when everyone is awake. I meet other people at the barge, including the mechanics of the Snijder workshop.

In the afternoon, I visit multicat **Nova** and the other crane barge **Norma V**. I meet many nationalities: Dutch, Japanese, English, Indian, Bangladeshi, Singaporean, Indonesian. Everyone is friendly – a Christmas mood is kicking in. Back at the office, we also prepare for the Christmas meeting on shore at night.



Everything has been set up in a way, that everyone who wants, gets the opportunity to attend the Christmas meetings. At 6am, a nice crowd (including people from the Norma V, multcats and speedboats) gathers at the Pontramaris. I tell the story of Jim and Della, the just married couple who make a huge sacrifice to buy a Christmas gift for each other. And in spite of the early time, the singing sounds fantastic.



After that, a speedboat takes me to tugboat **Courageous**. Its crew was not able to join the meeting, so I have a conversation and prayer in their mess room. Afterwards, we discuss some theological questions. Next, I visit the Nova again and multicat **WB2**. In between, I talk to crewmembers of the different speedboats. Unfortunately, I am not able to visit the **WB3**, but I already met its crewmembers at the Pontramaris.

At night time, one of the recreation rooms at the main accommodation is packed with people. In the nativity scene, people from different nationalities are gathered (including wise men from the east). Likewise, we gather from different backgrounds for this Christmas meeting. Christmas songs fill up the space. I tell the story of the two sons of the King. After the prayer and communion, we enjoy snack-time and lots of picture-taking. This is what Christmas is all about.



Afterwards, I sit down and relax in the other recreation room. I have to start to say goodbye. I continue my goodbyes next morning. The speedboat takes me back to Cox's Bazar, and then via Dacca and Singapore (where I pick up some of my luggage) I travel back to The Netherlands. I arrive early at Schiphol, at December 24: just in time for Christmas.

### Conclusion

Before my departure, I was not sure whether all the visit plans could be realized, but in the end almost all scheduled goals were achieved. When I write these lines, I am fully aware that none of these visits could take place without a lot of work done by many people in different offices (in Rotterdam, Papendrecht, areas and projects). I cannot find the right words to express the incredible hospitality which I receive everywhere. The "Lighten Up" Christmas tour included 14 different flights and 15 different places to sleep, but a friendly reception and room to talk to everyone is the common thread running through all of this. It was great to experience the energy and drive of people working abroad which is one of the main characteristics of the Dutch dredging companies.

So, I can only say to everyone involved: thank you so much for everything!!!

In the meantime, Christmas has passed. When I write this, I hear the explosions fire crackers: New Year's Eve. I wish everyone all the best and many blessings for 2020. Or, to quote Leonard Cohen one more time: *"There's a blaze of light in every word... Hallelujah!"*

Middelburg, December 31, 2019 - Stefan Francke

