Sea Kayaking Incident
Noorderhaaks
13 June 2010

Incident Report

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DEN HELDER – The KNRM (Royal Netherlands Lifeboat Institution) mobilised several vessels on Sunday afternoon as a group of kayakers got into trouble near 'Razende Bol' between Texel and Den Helder, the coastguard head quarters reports.

Two of a group of nine kayakers capsized and lost contact with the group. The kayakers raised the alarm. Seven kayakers continued from the 'Razende Bol' and landed safely on the beach on the island of Texel.

The two capsized paddlers were pulled from the water by the lifeboat from Den Helder and taken to land. One of the rescued persons was taken to hospital with signs of mild hypothermia.

### Dutch Canoe Association (NKB) Notices to Sea Kayakers dated 14 June 2010

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On Sunday 13 June a group of nine (very) experienced trip leaders of the Coastal Kayaking Committee of the national kayaking organisation Peddelpraat (Paddle Talk) planned a trip around Noorderhaaks sand spit. The goal of the day was a social paddle with the Peddelpraat sea kayaking trip leaders. On the northern coast and towards the west of Noorderhaaks the group encountered 2-3 meter high breaking and increasingly dumping waves over sandbars. After two x-rescues of one paddler the decision was made for an escape route towards Texel in the east. During the execution of the escape route contact was lost with three paddlers. Two of the missing paddlers ended-up swimming and rescued each other with one solo re-entry followed by an assisted re-entry. One of the two paddlers got seriously nauseated and had the beginnings of hypothermia. One thus incapable of paddling, the two rafted-up and called-out to the coast guard on VHF-radio for help. The third missing paddler informed the coast guard on VHF that he landed safely on the east side of Noorderhaaks. He had lost sight of the group after a solo re-entry and had continued and brought himself to safety. In the meantime, the raft of two had drifted with the tide and wind more than a mile to the north where they where the lifeboat took them aboard. The fully conscious hypothermic paddler was taken to hospital for check-up. The group of six that had landed safely on Texel communicated with the coast guard and, after all were accounted for, picked-up the one paddler that landed on Noorderhaaks and returned to Den Helder as a group of seven.

All paddlers are safe and well. Now is not the right time to write an extensive report of the course of events and evaluation. More time is needed for that. Through knowledge and training, all have made it back to safety. However, there have definitively been shortcomings from which we must learn. The incident received national press coverage. We find it important to give you this early first report with more information to follow.

Axel Schoevers  
(on behalf of the kayaking group)
Summary of Events

Introduction

The trip leaders of the Peddelpraat (Paddle Talk) coastal kayaking committee organised a trip between themselves on 13 June 2010. This trip had been added to the calendar during the annual November meeting of the Peddelpraat trip leaders as a social trip and to evaluate current rescue practices. The heel-hook rescue especially was an exercise they wanted to practise and exchange experiences on. The whole group was invited to provide input. The starting point was 'Het Kuitje', just south-east of Den Helder.

Information

High tide Harlingen : 11.10 hrs, 1 day after full moon, spring tide
Low tide Den Helder : 15.30 hrs
Wind forecast : north-west, 3-4 Bft., decreasing south-west 2-3 Bft.
Weather forecast : dry, semi-cloudy
Air temperature : 17° C
Water temperature : 13° C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weather situation and wave heights</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>11</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wind direction</td>
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<td>NW</td>
<td>WNW</td>
<td>NNO</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wind force average - max (Bft.)</td>
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<td>Avg. Significant wave height (meter)</td>
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<td>Max. Significant wave height (meter)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avg. Wave period (seconds)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avg Wave direction (degrees)</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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* : average between 11:00 and 15:00 hr.

Source: KNMI : historical weather data (location IJmuiden) on www.knmi.nl/klimatologie/daggegevens
Source: Ministerie V&W : historical wave data (location K13A) on www.waterbase.nl

The start

At 11.00 Onno Buwalda, Arie Kreuk, Axel Schoevers, Dirk-Jan de Boer, Elko Knobbe, Han Kreuk, Nico Bruin, Paul de Haas and Thierry Nijbroek meet at 'Het Kuitje'. There is no wind but it is sunny and very warm. The sea is like a mirror; a little hazy.

Onno : We decide that we will paddle around Noorderhaaks and on the south side look for a place to practise rescues.
Han : My suggestion to paddle along the south side of Noorderhaaks to the western tip is not taken up; I cannot convey my arguments such as the wave height and wind strength and direction in the past few days.
Arie: I stow the VHF radio and flare, which are normally in my life jacket, in my day hatch after considering the planned rescue practice. Only the orange survival bag is still in my life jacket.

Dirk-Jan: I have doubts about the wave heights above Noorderhaaks due to the wind during the days before. I don't express my doubts, there are more experienced people in the group who can judge this better. If left my VHF radio at home, as we are only going to practise.

Paul: I did not bring much. I did bring flares, exposure bag, duct tape, mobile phone and the chart. I put my VHF radio in the car next to my helmet. We are only going for a day of rolling and rescue practice.

Axel: Earlier in the week I let Onno know that I might not be able to make it on Sunday due to a very busy and late Saturday. I get up early on Sunday, feeling well and look forward to joining. As we were going to practise rescues I left a lot of my standard kit, such as my VHF radio and all my flares, at home.

Elko: I consciously left my GPS and VHF radio at home as we were going to practise all sorts of rescues during the day. I did, however, put a neoprene cap within reach in case we are in the water for a long time during practising.

Nico: I register us via the VHF radio with Den Helder Traffic Control.

On the way to Noorderhaaks

Just past the naval port of Den Helder, the group leaves the lee and the 3 knot ebb against a 3 Beaufort wind produces rough water (wave height to 50-75 cm). Just before and in the lee (waves) of Noorderhaaks we have a short snack break afloat. The sun has disappeared behind grey wispy clouds. There is a very visible area of breaking cross-waves on the east point of Noorderhaaks: a well know 'play area'. The group paddles and plays through this (not very powerful) surf (waves up to 1.5 m). After this the group comes back together. Without consulting as a whole group, the paddlers head for the waves on the north side of Noorderhaaks, paddling in a north-westerly direction.

Above Noorderhaaks

Onno: The waves further on are enticing. When we are in the waves I comment to my neighbour that they are easy to handle. Suddenly the waves are so high that I make sure not to be caught by a breaker. In a quieter area I wait with Thierry and Dirk-Jan. This must have been a beautiful sight: 3 red Nordkapps together. We are joined by Paul and Han. We go a little bit further.

Thierry: The waves gradually get higher and higher and are now over two metres high but don't break continuously. I manage to get a nice surf and am surprised at the speed my kayak reaches.

Dirk-Jan: At first I did not estimate the waves to be that high. I was, like everyone else, excited to play and practise in these waves.
Paul: The waves are getting higher and higher. Quite quickly I started to paddle differently, sharp and alert.

Nico: I noticed that the group separated fairly quickly and I felt that they kept a very northerly course.

Han: The waves slowly get higher and higher. It becomes increasingly more difficult to find a safe passage. Elko paddles to the side in front of me, also searching.

Axel: Pretty soon we arrive in an area with high waves with the occasional full-on breaker. I can dodge them all. By now I am in a different mode. By instinct I drop back to the rear, near Elko. I notice that Thierry also stays near Elko. I can see Onno ahead of me among high dumping breakers.

Elko: My expectation was that, after we left the area with the cross-breakers, we would paddle in quieter water close along Noorderhaaks, it turned out to be the opposite. We remained in the waves, which were becoming ever higher. At a certain moment I did not enjoy it anymore and started to worry about how much longer I would be able to stay upright in the big breakers coming from the front and the side. That turned-out the be quite a while (for me anyway) until a white capped wall of water approached. I thought 'Oh shit' and was nearly vertical against the wall. I did not quite reach the top and started to surf backwards quickly until I capsized. It went dark for a while and when it got lighter, I attempted a few times to roll upright but kept shaking left to right. Eventually I got out and held-on to the kayak. In no-time a guardian angel appeared in the shape of Thierry who quickly had me back in my kayak. There was a short lull to pump and halfway pumping more breakers threatened and we had to separate.

Axel: Thierry was closest and he was going for the rescue. I was afraid the rescue was going to be interrupted by another breaker, but it turned-out fine. Elko chose a slightly more northerly course that that I could see Onno taking in the distance.

Elko: Kayaking with a half-full cockpit was not easy; very unstable and soon I capsized again but this time I could right myself. Not long after there was another huge one that I could not clear. I went over again with the same result as before, I ended up next to it. This time Axel was nearby. Reluctantly he emptied my kayak, I got back in it and with a nearly empty kayak I could kayak normally.

Axel: Initially I wanted Elko to get back into his swamped cockpit as I was afraid of breakers during the rescue and another water-logged cockpit or worse. I did, however, decide to empty his kayak. This went well and surprisingly there were no breakers. I was pleased with myself about the small amount of water left in the kayak after this speedy emptying. I went for 'speed' rather then 'empty'. I thought of the breaker that had to come eventually. A little fiddling with the paddling jacket between the spray-deck. Thierry wanted to join the group. I requested (instructed) Thierry to stay with me. If I would
I certainly wanted a third person ready for a possible rescue. I discussed with Thierry that I wanted to land on the Noorderhaaks sand spit with Elko. I thought I heard Thierry say that this was a prohibited area (nature reserve). I subsequently realised that we would have go through a surf zone again with possibly another rescue. I then noticed that there was a corridor with 'green waves' all the way to 'Paal 9' (a beach restaurant named after a distance marker) on Texel. Left and right of the corridor were breaking waves, but hardly any breakers in-between these. That seemed like a good plan for Elko and me. I then told Thierry that I was going to paddle to 'Paal 9' on Texel with Elko.

Thierry: I ask Axel if I should try to warn the others, but Axel really wanted to have someone with him for the moment. We set the course to about 60° and I spent a little time waving my paddle in the air, hoping that someone would notice.

In the meantime at the front

Han: There was another wave building. I went into it 'with the turbo', luckily just making it over the top and down with a huge force. Arie asks me: 'Are you still enjoying this?'. My answer: 'No, I don't enjoy this at all, please stay close to me!'. Again a wave was building-up and broke. The 'turbo' did not make it this time. During the backward surf I capsized vertical and backwards. With the very last bit of air I managed to roll upright in one go. The cockpit was half full of water; penetrated everything with its pressure. Because of my borrowed slippers being too big, my own fault as I forgot my shoes, I could not pump. Onno was positioned slightly further. I told him in no uncertain terms what I thought about the situation. We then decided between all of us to turn back, this was no longer responsible, it was only going to get worse.

Onno: And again the waves are getting higher. I am beginning to get worried whether I'll be able to withstand them when they break. Again a 'quiet' bit. Han expresses her serious doubts. My doubts change to worry. I did not like it anymore with the waves being so high. Paul and Dirk-Jan think about continuing. But I shout, also fuelled by Han's doubts, that we will go back. We are missing people; Elko, Thierry and Axel don't join us. According to Han, Elko had capsized. We turn back.

Paul: Together with Onno, Dirk-Jan and Han we wait. Nothing to be seen, no paddle, nothing. What are we going to do? Continue I suggest: not a good plan. Land on Noorderhaaks sand spit: not possible, prohibited area. Back then. All four of us turn round and go back in the direction of the 'Molengat' buoyed channel where Elko, Axel and Thierry should be somewhere.

Dirk-Jan: At a certain moment in time I see Thierry wave with his paddle and we (I think Paul, Onno, Thierry and Han and I) turn round to look for the others. I don't believe Nico was with us any more at this point.
**Nico on his own**

At a certain point I see Thierry shoot past me on the left in a long surf. At the same time I am picked up a wave which ends in a roll after a long bongo-slide. When I rolled back up again, there was no-one from the group to be seen anymore. I look around, for one thing to determine my position, for another to see if I can locate other members of the group. At that moment, a large breaker hits me and semi-dislodges me from my kayak and I have to get out. I manage to hold-on to the cockpit of my kayak, with my paddle under my arm. I cannot recall exactly, but 3 or 4 times I get hit by a breaker. After that it calms down a little and I manage to get back into my kayak with a re-entry-and-roll. I empty the cockpit and cannot see anyone around me. I take a westerly course and reason that I got behind. I therefore decide to carry on.

**Onno on his own**

In the first instance I chose the opposite direction of the outward trip. But then I think of all the breakers. If one of those catches you from behind, you are totally helpless. Manoeuvring between the high waves which are threatening to break I paddle more or less parallel to the waves to calmer water. I see Arie next to me. Nice that there is someone near.

I swear loudly when I see a wave coming which is almost certainly going to break. No escaping. Then I better put all my might into a 'support'. My arm not too high, as you were taught and are now teaching others, low and lean/tuck into the wave. The support holds, that is, the position of arms and body in relation to the kayak. I capsize, despite the support. I automatically get righted again but I am not seated properly in the cockpit anymore. The kayak stays upright, due to the power of the wave. But as soon as the breaker loses strength, I lose my support. Rolling is not an option with the kayak not properly around my waist. I have to get out.

If I wait a little, they'll come to help me back in. Nothing to worry about! First some breakers to deal with, they push me to quieter water. It is a little while before I realise that I am not in the breakers anymore. A seal comes to have a look. He (or she) thought it looked strange. He does not understand my request to go get help. Nosily he comes back again and again. Until he comes up on the wrong side and the kayak bumps into it. Sticking my paddle up to be more visible. No-one comes.

I hear someone call. I think they are looking for me. Pity, no-one. I look around and see a yellow kayak adrift, without a kayaker. Oh, that's not good. But good for me, I can find support there. I feel that I am cooling down. I decide to take action now because I still can. I am still warm enough to take action myself. I think that if I don't do it now, it will be impossible later. What is to be done? Take my sandals off (forgot my paddling shoes). With my sandals on I cannot operate my foot pump. Ok, do it! Don't tie them to the deck; put them inside, that will reduce the resistance when rolling. So I tie my sandals down behind my seat.

Put the kayak in the correct position, so that you get help from the waves. Put on my nose clip to prevent cold water entering, crawl into the kayak and pull tight. Get hold of the paddle properly and lengthen it to get more leverage. Success! I come up, what a
relief! However, a cockpit full of water is very unstable and does not paddle well. Bracing and pumping I struggle to the lone kayak. I thought it was Elko’s kayak. But is has the word ‘Nederland’ on it and ‘Trekeend’. That is Arie’s! Arie is nearby in the water. Good, first get my own kayak in order. Fasten my spray deck and continue to pump it empty. As soon as I have put-on the spray-deck I begin to struggle towards Arie. He is close-by but it takes ages before I reach him. I am glad I have the support of his kayak.

**Arie on his own**

I manage to roll the first time but the next wave caused me to capsize again. I had looped backwards or something. Maybe the kayak had hit the bottom, the kayak was rolling round strangely and I felt a knock. I manage the next roll as well, but the kayak did not follow, I was half out of it. I remember a terribly lack of oxygen, which is certainly not good for peace of mind. So I was out of my kayak. I had hold of my kayak at the toggle, but it was pulled out of my hand through the force and for safety I had to let go quick. I saw an orange tube with a flare floating around, but did not at all realise this was the flare that had been fastened inside the cockpit of my kayak and I made no attempt to retrieve it. I was feeling very drowsy. I was very surprised and felt all this was not possible and that it was a dream.

At one point I saw Onno in his kayak. I was totally unaware of his presence in the area earlier. It felt like another 15 minutes at least before I was back in my own kayak. He held the kayak more in its place than that he came to me but at least I could swim to it.

**Onno and Arie raise the alarm**

Onno: When Arie reaches his kayak he performs a heel-hook rescue. I hold his kayak upright and he is back-in in no time. That was quick. Arie needs to get his breath back. His breathing really rasps. When his breathing is nearly back to normal, he fastens his spray-deck and starts to pump. I also continue to pump my own kayak. We can see Texel and decide that is where we need to go. But first get our breath back. But then my stomach empties itself of its contents. I had repressed this nausea since my re-entry. It feels a little better, but I still don’t feel good. I also feel that I am getting colder. We decide to get the VHF radio that Arie has in his day hatch. Listen first. Scarily quiet according to Arie. We are worried.

Arie: Once back in my kayak I recovered quickly. I was not cold and not seasick but I had had seawater in my throat and that is not a pleasant feeling. It is difficult to talk and I first had to regulate my breathing. Onno had to throw up. He had delivered a feat of strength after he had been in the water for some time. Onno stabilised himself on my kayak and luckily we were now in calmer water.

Our dilemma now was that we did not see or hear anything that looked like a raised alarm. An hour had passed and I assumed the rest of the group must have missed us for some time. Thus we were looking to see if there were any search actions. I saw two helicopters, but those were not searching. For me
that was an indication that the alarm had not been raised. As I knew that apart from Han everybody had a VHF radio (I did not know about the real VHF radio situation), I became afraid that the problems were so severe that no one was able to raise the alarm and that the problems elsewhere were much bigger than ours. Onno was no longer able to kayak independently and had to use my kayak to steady himself.

That was the moment to send out a PAN PAN call over the VHF radio. We did not send out a MAYDAY as our situation and the unknown of the situation elsewhere did not justify a MAYDAY.

I explained the situation to the Coast Guard that we could no longer continue. I also explained the situation of the others as far as I could judge without more information and the fact that we had heard no VHF radio call from them, neither on channel 62, 77 nor on 16. The latter I found especially disturbing. A short while later the Coast Guard informed me that there were six kayakers near 'Paal 9' on Texel. I was unable to make contact with the group on channel 16. I only had one hand available for communication; the other was needed for stabilizing Onno.

I then explained there was another kayaker missing. Later I had a message from the Coast Guard that he had been tracked down elsewhere and was safe.

**Evacuation to 'Paal 9'**

Han : Dirk-Jan was caught by a wave and rolled-up. A good decision to go back. Where were Arie, Onno and Nico? I thought they were (now) behind us? Thierry asks if he should go back to look for them. Not a good idea, better to get the rest of the group to safety under Axel's leadership.

Elko : We decided to make our way to Texel, out of the 'washing machine'. There were still plenty of waves, but no more breakers. All the way we kept looking back to see if we could spot the others, but that was impossible in these waves. At about 15.00 hours we reached 'Paal 9' on Texel.

Axel : I thought I was going to paddle to Texel with just Elko, but before long we were joined by four others and there were now six of us. We were missing Nico, Onno and Arie. We discussed if some of us ought to go back to get the others. The experiences of the others told me everything. Almost everyone had had to roll and Han told me she did not want to even think of having to perform a rescue in there. I reasoned it would be difficult to find the others and that they were the strongest kayakers. In the meantime I had taken charge and I felt primarily responsible for Elko and only secondly for the others in 'my' group. I did not worry about the other three. We paddled to 'Paal 9'. I judged that the 'group' was totally safe at that moment.

Thierry : A little later, Han, Dirk-Jan and Paul join us. Han tells me that it is a 'witch's cauldron' behind us and that she was thrown upside down more than once by
the waves. There is a short discussion whether to send people back into this cauldron with all the possible consequences, but what can happen to three very strong paddlers who are either still playing in the waves or have possibly already made their way through? On the way I try to contact Nico by VHF radio, but without success. He does not hear my calls.

Paul: I quickly realise there are a few missing. I put it to the group. Axel has taken charge and he decides we continue. I did not feel good about this; you don't leave part of the group behind. The decision to take the rest of the group to safe water first was the right one. I don't argue further, never good to have arguments on the water.

Dirk-Jan: In the group of six, Axel clearly took charge and decided to proceed to Texel. Some expressed their doubts whether we should wait, but eventually we agree to paddle to Texel after which we quickly enter calmer water.

**Arie and Onno being rescued**

Onno: The lifeboat from Den Helder requests our position. The GPS had turned itself off. Pressing the little buttons is still no problem for me. The hypothermia is not too bad. I do feel very unwell though and look green and yellow according to Arie. Passing-on the co-ordinates is also successful. The lifeboat approaches fast. Arie directs them to our position via his VHF radio. When the lifeboat is with us, most of the tension leaves me. All will be well now. 'We will reverse towards you, and get you on-board at the stern!' we hear the crew say. Fine, they know best. We see the crew secure themselves and the stern lowered slightly to create a sort of small step.

Arie: At the first attempt the lifeboat reverses half over us because of a wave and I got the full force of the hydro-jets. I was, with my kayak, completely under the lifeboat. Those hydro-jets blew more water into my nose than any breaker earlier. The next attempt was more successful.

Onno: The lifeboat hits us, I see Arie going down at a right angle. The next moment I am upside down with the lifeboat on top of me. Out of my kayak again then. When I surface again the lifeboat is about 25 metres away from us. One of the crew is in the water. In my recollection, he is pulled on-board first and then us. Our kayaks follow. I am put on a stretcher and I am wrapped-up. I did take off my buoyancy aid (PFD) and my tow-belt first. I feel water lapping around my body. My clothing did not take-in that much water. My last swim must have caused this. It is the only explanation! I surrender myself to my rescuer and don't think of getting rid of the water. When everyone and everything is on board and the stern of the lifeboat is secured, we go to Den Helder at top speed. On the way I am told I will be taken to hospital as my core temperature is too low.
In the meantime Nico is safe but on his own on Noorderhaaks

A little past the posts of the prohibited area I land and again but see no-one. On channel 62 I twice request Thierry to switch his VHF radio over to channel 77. Den Helder Traffic Centre tells me that I have to stop these calls. I am now terribly worried and decide to paddle further to the south-east point and land again on Noorderhaaks to see if I can spot someone. No-one unfortunately. I now paddle to the east side and land again. Why I did not think about the phone earlier I don't know but I decide to call Thierry and notice that he has left a message. I call again and before long we are in contact. I can't put into words how much tension leaves me. It must have been a huge amount. Through channel 62 I hear that a lifeboat is searching for two kayakers and that six are on the beach at 'Paal 9' and I tell them that I am fine. This happens again on channel 67 because Den Helder Traffic Centre and Den Helder Rescue appear not to be communicating directly with each other.

On land at Post 9

At around 15.00 hours the group of six arrives at 'Paal 9'. The whole escape route took about an hour. Thierry is unable to contact Arie, Onno and Nico by phone and sends them a message. Through Thierry's VHF radio the group hears a message about 'two kayakers at Noorderhaaks'. Dirk-Jan contacts the Den Helder Traffic Centre by phone to report that there are three kayakers missing. Now the group of six learns that the KNRM (Royal Netherlands Lifeboat Institution) was mobilised to rescue two kayakers of which one is sick/seasick. Thierry receives a phone call from Nico to say that he is safe on land at the eastern point of Noorderhaaks. Through Thierry's VHF radio Axel communicates with Den Helder Rescue on channel 67; numbers and locations are checked and confirmed. Everyone has been located. Thierry's VHF radio battery dies and so we only have contact with Den Helder Traffic Centre by mobile phone. The two kayakers have been taken on board and one is being treated for hypothermia.

Onno to hospital

With joined forces I am being lifted off the lifeboat and into the waiting ambulance. In the ambulance the paramedic switched the heating on. Cockily I say that we are always being taught that you need to warm-up from the inside. He agrees with me, but adds that I am not too cold and this won't do me any harm. Five minutes later I arrive at the hospital where they are waiting for me. At long last I can take my clothes off and dry myself. Luckily I am allowed to do this by myself. I lie on a bed and they place a sort of airbed on top of me. With this they can blow warm air past me. They put in a thermometer, a peg on my finger for my pulse and a blood pressure meter. I can keep an eye on myself on the monitor. My temperature is 35.6°C. That is not warm enough! I notice that myself and I am (badly) shaking uncontrolled. It tires you out! I can give my phone number, they dial and I can talk myself. That is not nice, having to tell them at home that things went wrong and that I am in hospital with hypothermia. I am being told off! How on earth can this happen with so much experience in the group? Then great joy because it all ended well. In the meantime my temperature has risen to 36.2°C. They take me off the monitor and I am being sent for a warm shower. That helps enormously and I feel a lot better. I am then more or less forced to drink a mug of warm
tea. Nice, I have another one later. In the waiting room we wait for the results of my blood test and they check my temperature once more in my ear. That has risen to 37.1°C. That is fine. And at about 20.00 hours I am allowed to leave hospital. At home I go to bed, where sleep wins from the recurring thought of "what if did not manage that re-entry..."

Epilogue

After agreeing upon with Den Helder Traffic Centre the group of six leaves the beach at 'Paal 9'. At 'De Hors' on Texel Nico rejoins the group and the group paddle back to the Den Helder Marina; time of arrival 18.30 hours. Here Arie is waiting for the group. Here the decision is made that the group of six make their way back to their cars at the start point 'Het Kuitje'; time of arrival 19.00 hours. The group, with exception of Onno who is still in hospital for check-up, get together at Thierry's to recover from the worst of the shock over dinner. On closer inspection Arie's kayak is badly damaged and possibly a total loss. On the way home most of the group hear the short news bulletin on the radio or read it in the newspaper on Monday. On Monday evening the group publishes a short announcement through the digital newsletter of the sea kayaking committee of the Dutch Canoe Association as a prelude to a more detailed report. In the days following the incident all the participants write personal reports. Arie's GPS was switched-on during the whole adventure and recorded everything in high resolution, just like an aeroplane's black box. On Wednesday evening, the personal experiences of all are exchanged and evaluated at Onno's and the basis is laid for conclusions and recommendations.
Conclusions

An incident does not usually happen out-of-the-blue. It often is a chain of events that culminates into an incident. Sometimes it is a case of luck: an incident could have occurred but by chance it did not. How could this have happened to this group of very experienced sea kayak trip leaders and (top) instructor/coaches? After reading the previous report, many a sea kayaker will have raised their eyebrows.

We know that we obviously made mistakes on that Sunday. There are also things that, through our training and experience, made for a happy ending. We are also very aware that we definitively also had an amount of luck.

The heavy surf above Noorderhaaks certainly opened our eyes. A large scale Coast Guard rescue and damage to personal reputation and kayak; we are glad to be in a position to learn from it. On account of this we would like to share our experiences, conclusions and recommendations with all of the sea kayaking community [in the Netherlands].

We are of the opinion that this incident could happen only because we were amongst trip leaders. The feeling of responsibility that is normally ingrained in us being trip leaders was completely lacking on that Sunday being with a group of friends. We feel responsible for participants on our trips, but did not feel responsible for one another on that Sunday. It is quite shocking to come to this conclusion.

We neglected some very essential safety aspects.

There was no formal leader for the trip; there was no central briefing at the start. During the last (natural) regrouping north-east of Noorderhaaks, there was no consultation about the continuation. The doubts of some participants, and there certainly were some, both at the start and once under way, were not voiced and shared.

Essential (safety) equipment was left behind. Seven (!) of the group of nine own a VHF radio. However, only 3 carried one with them. Four VHF radios were left at home or in the car! Most of us were thinking about 'practising rescues' and not about undertaking a challenging trip. The equipment of some of the group members was not sufficient for a trip round Noorderhaaks with the known wave height and inevitable sizeable surf.

The conditions north of Noorderhaaks were on and above the limits of the personal abilities for most of the members of the group. The 2 to 3 metre high waves were so high and conditions so rough that the participants could often not see or communicate with one another when at a safe distance from each other.

After Elko's rescue by Thierry and Axel, Axel was completely focussed on getting Elko out of the area of the breakers and then to evacuate to 'Paal 9'. Axel took charge, but not for the whole group of nine (!). Axel did not know that Onno and Arie (through) Thierry were also aware of the escape route and that they had also started to take this course when disaster struck.

The opinion of the group is that the conditions of the surf in which Onno, Arie and Nico ended-up and out of their kayaks were such that one could no longer rescue/assist the
other. The opinion is that there was a localised ground swell on a sand bar and that Arie’s kayak struck the bottom and sustained structural damage.

No procedure had been agreed for VHF radio communication within the group. The six kayakers who evacuated to 'Paal 9' had no realisation nor expressed worry that the three missing persons could be in trouble. Only after overhearing a VHF radio communication by chance about 'two kayakers', did the group of six relay to the Traffic Centre that it concerned the group of nine kayakers of which three (very experienced) persons were missing and six had safely landed at 'Paal 9'.

Arie had, inevitably, let go of his kayak in the heavy surf and would possibly not have managed to rejoin his kayak on his own or it would have taken even longer. Arie's VHF radio was stored in his day hatch. Arie did not, with the exception of his orange exposure bag, have any usable signaling equipment on his person. Onno spent an estimated 30 minutes in the water before the conditions were such that he could perform a re-entry-and-roll. Arie spent an estimated 45 minutes trying to swim to his kayak.

All participants believed they were nowhere near as far west above Noorderhaaks as they were in reality. The outgoing tide drifted Onno and Arie out of the surf. During the time in which the group of six was making its way to 'Paal 9', Onno and Arie were in the water and Nico travelled all the way round Noorderhaaks. During that whole period no one knew about the others' situation.

The things that went well; that prevented worse:

- Two of the kayakers (Onno and Nico) managed to perform a solo rescue (re-entry-and-roll) after having been forced out of their kayaks in conditions in which never is practiced (or can safely be practiced).
- Through the re-entry-and-roll by Onno a rescue situation was established for Arie; Arie could be reunited with his kayak.
- Arie was dressed for the water and did not get cold.
- Arie and Onno made, as a 'raft', an emergency call over the VHF radio to which the rescue services responded.
- Onno was able to communicate their exact position because he had his GPS with him.
- Nico tried to make contact with the other participants immediately after he got to safety: first on VHF radio, then on his mobile. Nico informed the Traffic Centre of the situation and his position.
- Eventually (if only partially) someone took charge: the choosing of a safe escape route to 'Paal 9' by Axel.
- Thierry was able to signal the front paddlers (with exception of Nico) about the change of plans.
- Nico had informed the Traffic Centre at the start of the trip by VHF radio.
Recommendations

Preparations and trip leadership:
- There should always be a leader on a trip; preferably decided beforehand.
- Biggest danger: trip leaders/very experienced kayakers among themselves.
- Listen to one another at the briefing before the trip and adjust the plans when there are doubts amongst the participants.
- Decide on a channel (channel 77) at the briefing and decide on a communication protocol between all group members that carry a VHF radio.

Equipment:
- Be dressed for the water, not for the weather.
- Always wear a helmet if there is chance of surf or rescue exercises.
- Trip leaders and co-leaders must have a fully charged, waterproof VHF radio on their person.
- Unlock the VHF radio dual-watch function.
  In the Netherlands dual/tri-watch and scanning are officially not allowed on a licensed VHF radio and is thus disabled by serviceable programming. In the Netherlands one can only get a license for ATIS-enabled VHF radio’s. ATIS stands for Automatic Transmitter Identification System.
- Flares remain useful: preferably on the person.
- Mobile phone numbers of all participants; preferably programmed into the phone.
- Always carry the (complete) safety equipment; plans and situations may change.
- Reflective tape on kayak and paddle (advice from the lifeboat crew member).

Trip execution in general:
- Remain aware of what could go wrong; stay alert, even among friends.
- Trust your own instinct and consult the others in time.
- Use natural moments and locations to re-group and for consultation.
- If, as a trip leader, you get into a situation where you don't want or cannot rescue another anymore, you have gone too far.
- Always stay well below your own personal ability limit as a trip leader.

Trip execution Noorderhaaks:
- Approach Noorderhaaks from the south and circumnavigate clock-wise. This way you encounter the highest surf first. On top of that you can also get to land to check first.

What to do in case of incidents:
- As soon as you are aware that someone is missing, put out a call on VHF radio channel 77 and listen continuously thereafter.
- Ensure you know how to operate a VHF radio with dual-watch.
- If no contact is established with the missing person, immediately inform the Traffic Centre.
- After informing the Traffic Centre of the missing person, depending on the situation, go and search yourself or call for the rescue services. It is important to prevent the situation from becoming even less clear through even more groups on the water. Only go out and search yourself (preferably with assistance) if you and the group are safe.
• Priorities are:
  o Yourself (compare First Aid; own safety first).
  o Group (ensure the rest of the group does not get into trouble).
  o Swimmer, injured or missing person.
  o Equipment (lost, damaged).

Personal skills:
• Be trained and maintain your skills.
• A solo re-entry-and-roll is compulsory for trip leaders (trip leader assessment requirement), but is not a guarantee for safety. If your companions are unable to rescue you, you have to perform a self-rescue with all the attached risks. What are the options to call for (external) help if your skills are not sufficient, or if you are rendered incapable (lost kayak, sea sickness, injury, hypothermia)?
• Practise safely in rough conditions to build-up your personal skills. BCU: 'challenging conditions/low consequences'.

Training:
• Practise operating and communication procedures of a VHF radio whilst on a trip.
• Use of VHF radio during a sea kayak trip and within the group to be included in training manuals for trip leaders.
• What to do as a lone person in the water and what to absolutely never do.
• Exercises with the Coast Guard for experiences of both lifeboat crew and kayakers on approaching and taking kayakers on-board.
• Alternative off-shore training for instructors and trip leaders; dressed in sea kayak clothing.
Appendix 1: GPS track of Arie's kayak with key events specified.

GPS track for Google Earth: [www.seakayaker.nl/TMP/20100613.kml](http://www.seakayaker.nl/TMP/20100613.kml)

Significant wave heights on 13 June 2010 (Location K13A); avg. 6 second period.
Appendix 2 : The participants

**Arie Kreuk** is a NKB senior sea kayak instructor and NKB coach tutor. Arie started sea kayaking in 1989 and since 1998 has been active for his club and all three Dutch national kayak sport organisations (NKB, PP and TKBN). He organised sea kayak clinics for the TKBN for a number of years. In his day job he is responsible and certified in Functional Safety (risk assessment and implementation) in the offshore and process industry worldwide. Arie paddled a Valley Argonaut.

**Axel Schoevers** is an aspirant BCU Level 5 Sea Kayak Coach, NKB senior sea kayak instructor, NKB coach tutor and sea kayak guide. Axel has been kayaking since 1994 and has been active at PP and NKB sea camps since 2000. He has been chairman of the PP coastal kayaking committee for seven years, for which he has been trip leader for more than twelve years. Axel has led the PP sea camp for four years. He is a member of the NKB sea kayaking committee. In the capacity of BCU coach and assessor, Axel is internationally active with trainings and assessments for, among others, BCU 4* sea kayak leader. Axel paddles a Nigel Dennis Explorer.

**Dirk-Jan de Boer** has been a NKB sea kayak instructor since 2001. He has been involved in sea kayaking since 1994. Before this time he was a very keen windsurfer. As an instructor he has been actively involved in the sea camps of PP and NKB and he leads trips for NKB, PP and TKBN. He is member of the sea kayaking committee of the Franeker canoe club. In daily life he works for the Medical Centre Leeuwarden as a laboratory technician/nurse on the heart catherisation department. Dirk-Jan paddles a Valley Nordkapp.

**Elko Knobbe** has been a NKB senior sea kayak instructor since 1994 and is a NKB coach tutor. In the seventies Elko was at the very start of the introduction of sea kayak training courses in The Netherlands, based on the BCU, by means of inviting-over BCU instructors. For 17 years he organised the PP sea camp and for 15 years he organised guide-led sea kayaking trips for PP in Wales and Scotland. He is the author of the only Dutch book about sea kayaking. Elko is the original author and now the editor of all NKB sea kayak training manuals. Elko paddles a Nigel Dennis Explorer HV.

**Han Kreuk** has been a NKB sea kayak instructor since 2001 and a NKB coach tutor. Han has been kayaking since 1975 and for six years was responsible for the sea kayak training courses for the TKBN. In her daily life Han works as an on-call practise assistant for a health centre, but is out kayaking at every opportunity. Han paddles a Nigel Dennis Romany.

**Onno Buwalda** is a NKB senior sea kayak instructor and NKB coach tutor. Onno has been kayaking since age 16, on the sea from age 21 and he circumnavigated Noorderhaaks many a time. For about seven years he organised and led the PP sea camp. Onno is the current chairman of the PP coastal kayaking committee of which he has been a trip leader for around twenty years. His day job is teaching and coaching in secondary vocational education. Onno paddles a Valley Nordkapp.

**Paul de Haas** is a trip leader and a NKB aspirant sea kayak instructor. He organised the PP sea camp several times, including the 2010 one. In 2009 he circumnavigated Ireland with his partner Marian and they are currently preparing for Iceland in 2011. Paul is
self-employed as a cabinet maker and interior builder. Paul paddles a Nigel Dennis Explorer.

**Thierry Nijbroek** is a trip leader and NKB aspirant sea kayak instructor. He has been kayaking on the sea since age 12 and because of his age, has had to wait before he could take his assessments for sea proficiency and advanced sea proficiency. Den Helder is his home and 'de Razende Bol' (Noorderhaaks) his favourite destination. Thierry paddles a Valley Nordkapp.

**Nico Bruin** became member of Peddelpraat in 2005 and is ever-since focused on open water paddling. It is clear to him that he should train for that and gained the award for advanced sea proficiency (trip leader). He enjoys introducing others to the natural beauty of the sea kayaking environment. He does this for his club and since 2009 as trip leader for Peddelpraat. Nico paddles a Nigel Dennis Explorer.

**Legend :**

- **PP** : Peddelpraat (Paddle Talk)
- **NKB** : Nederlandse Kano Bond (Dutch Canoe & Kayak Association)
- **TKBN** : Toeristische Kano Bond Nederland (Dutch Canoe & Kayak Touring Union)
- **BCU** : British Canoe Union
Appendix 3 : Noorderhaaks and 'de Razende Bol'

In the North Sea, directly north-west of Den Helder lies a (very much shifting) sand spit that bears the name of Noorderhaaks and that is more locally known as 'de Razende Bol' (translates as the Raging Spit). The higher parts of the sand spit only flood during storm spring tides. It is a nature reserve and a high-water refuge for sea birds and seals. Since 2006 the northern coast of the sand-spit is closed to the public by enforcing a restricted area to give an undisturbed refuge to the seals that rest there in numbers.

South of Noorderhaaks lies the busy Schulpengat/Breewijd shipping channel that has traffic from large off-shore industry supply vessels, fishing vessels, and navy ships. Den Helder is the main navy port of the Netherlands.

The southern tip of the Island Texel is an extensive sand spit that is called 'de Hors'. Between 'de Hors' and Noorderhaaks lies the 'Molengat' shipping channel. About 3 km north of 'de Hors', the dunes start and there is beach access with a restaurant that is locally known as 'Paal 9'.

This area provides almost endless opportunities for sea kayak touring, training and skills and leadership assessments. It is also a very 'treacherous' place because of strong 3-4 knot currents, surf on the beaches, confusing wind-against-tide seas in the 'Marsdiep' channel and breaking seas and 'zipper waves' over the shallows around Noorderhaaks. There are infrequent and condition/location/time/tide dependant tide-races and overfalls. Furthermore there is commercial and recreational shipping and a ferry to Texel to take into account. Paddling around the Island of Texel (generally a two-day trip) combines most of the knowledge, skills and experience a sea kayaker should have in one go, including tidal planning through the mud flats of the 'Waddenzee'.

Extract of chart 1811.2 (Source: Netherlands Hydrographic Office)