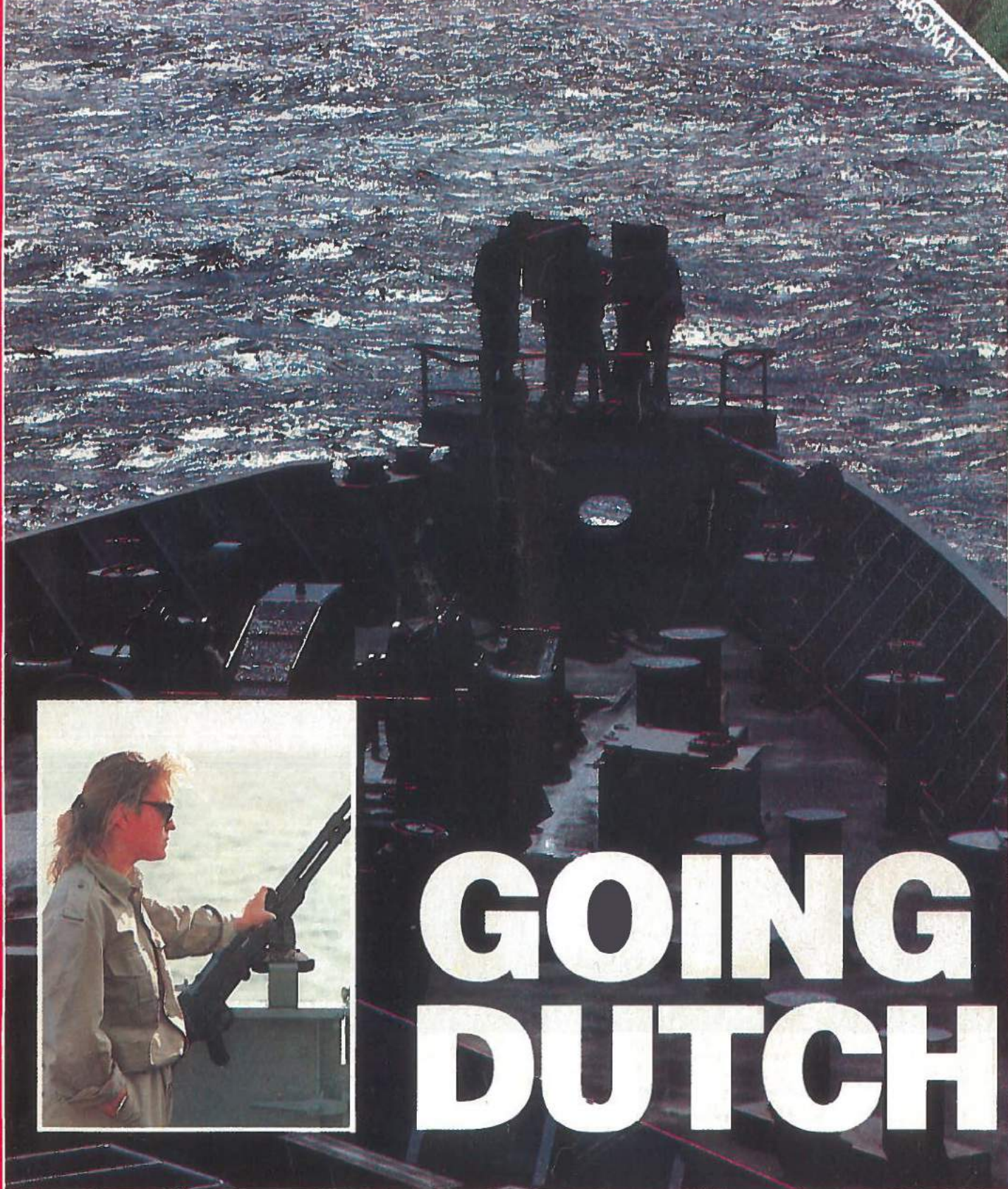


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3 - 9 January 1991

Gulf Weekly

STRICTLY PERSONAL



GOING DUTCH

COVER STORY

Air surveillance: One of the two Sea King helicopters manned by British Air Force personnel keeping round the clock vigil

Facing page: Mail time is fun time... two days before Christmas Zuiderkruis recieved two tonnes of mail



GOING DUTCH

Twelve hours of work and 12 hours of rest... Life on board the Dutch supply vessel *HNLMS Zuiderkruis* isn't your everyday run-of-the-mill kind of existence. On a constant high alert, the catch words to survival are – being aware, being alert and being ready. The lives of the 300-odd male and female navy personnel revolve around defence watch and round the clock surveillance. But as the flip side of the navy life reveals... it isn't all combat talk. There is time for comradeship too

by Hana Ibrahim
Pictures by Javed Nawab

Now that you are home and dry and on rock solid turf, it seems like a far-fetched dream. A 10-hour escapade in the high seas that yielded more than a queasy stomach. A riveting adventure that momentarily classed you among the brave. A cruise of sorts that gave you a different perspective of life at sea.... From your perch of comparative nescience it could have been all that and more... Even an unforgettable experience.

But turning a simple assignment into a high-falutin adventure would be stretching the truth a tad bit beyond the realms of reality. For reality was, but an invitation to spend a few hours with the Dutch task group and catch a glimpse of their firepower capabilities. Watch them demonstrate the prowess of their home made weapons and may be see for yourself what life is like on board a battle ship. Just routine activity... banal by any shipboard standards.

Perhaps, if the sea was less choppy and a jackstay transfer or

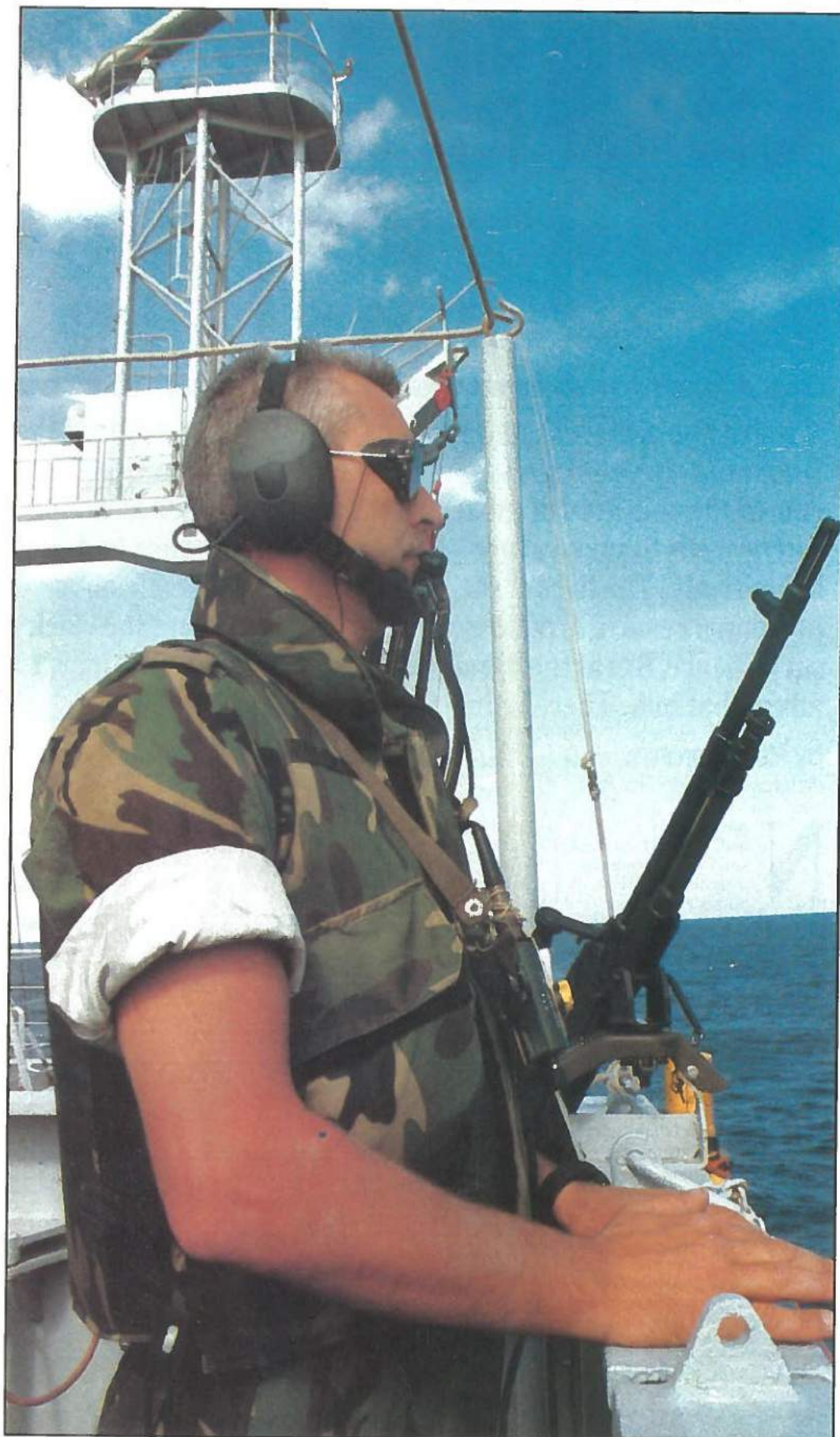
a quickie reconnaissance tour on a Seaking helicopter hadn't been included in the itinerary you could in all honesty say that it was just another assignment. Even just another day on board just another ship. But the sea was choppy, and the Dutch navy did want to give you more than a quick demonstration of their combat missiles. They wanted you to sample fully the variance

of on board metier. They wanted you to experience first hand the joys and drudgery of naval life. For a brief 10 hours, they invited you to be one of them.

And you were. And you had your adventure of sorts. Perhaps more than what you bargained for. A bone-bashing ferry ride on a choppy sea that had you fight-



COVER STORY

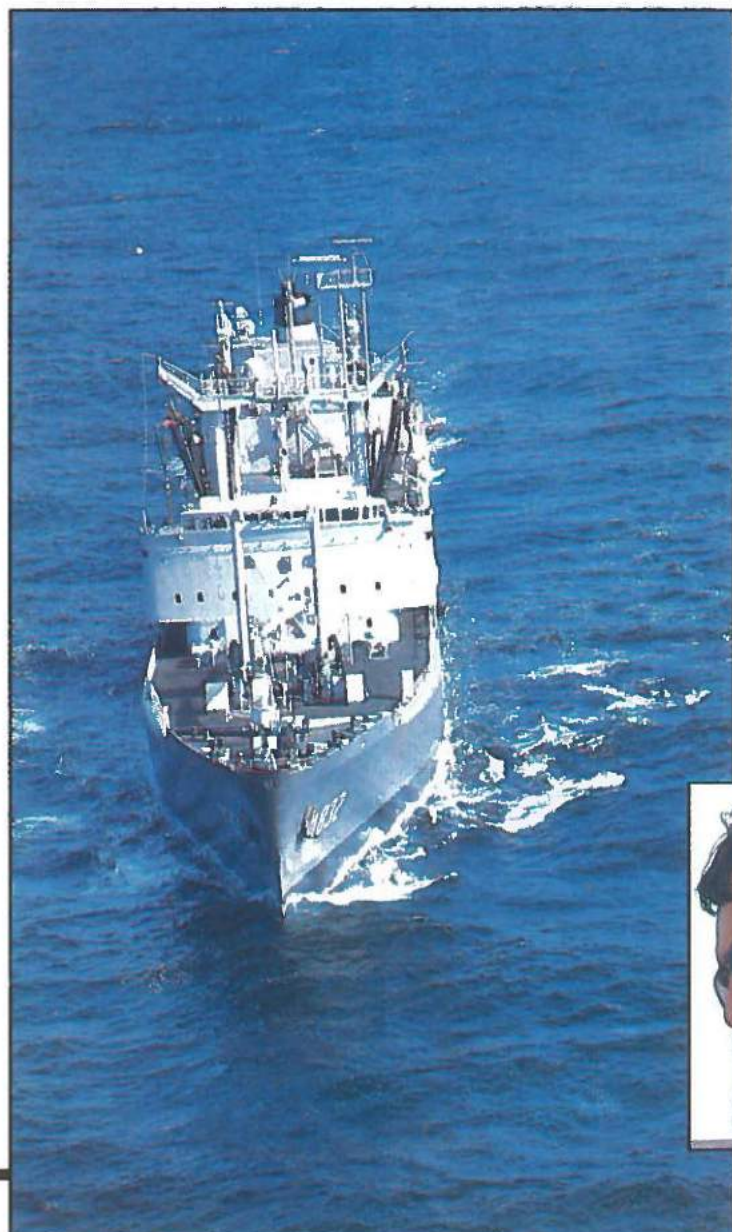


ing to hold down the queasy feeling of imminent motion sickness and your seat in the pilots cabin at the same time. A mad scramble up a precariously placed rickety rope ladder for a pre-planned rendezvous aboard the frigate *HNLMS Jacob Van Heemskerck*. A quick tour, even quicker demonstration of the firing capabilities of the Goalkeeper and another precarious journey, this time on a light jackstay to the supply vessel *HNLMS Zuiderkruis*.... Danger. Excitement. Pure devilry. Is this what entails being part of a navy?

Not on your life. Attune yourself to the surging motion of the vessel; and you realise that there's a whole heap more to being in the navy than scrambling from one point to another in a quaint manner guaranteed to give you apoplexy. "We don't do that kind of thing often," points out Officer Manuela Wibier, who despite being with the Dutch Navy for over six years had travelled via the jackstay just once.

Chalk it up as experience. The jackstay is incidental. What's more real is life aboard the *Zuiderkruis*, the Dutch supply vessel carrying a contingent of female navy personnel and preparing itself for battle in case of war. Of course everybody on board *Zuiderkruis* including Captain Gys Hooft fervently hopes there won't be a war. But they've got to be realistic and they've got to be prepared.

Hence the state of constant high alert. From dawn to dusk and be-



Clockwise from far left: Defence watch...A Dutch Marine guards the outside weapon – a short range 20 mm gun; Women are also equally involved in the round the clock alert; Target practise; Captain Gys Hooft; HNLMS Zuiderkruis

yond, half the crew are on defence watch, keeping assiduous vigil over the empty seas and the equally empty skies, honing their combat skills, familiarising themselves with the on board missiles.... Watching, waiting, perhaps even praying that they won't be subjected to a sneak attack. While the other half rest, recuperate and build up the necessary stamina for a long day's work, when their turn comes up for deck duty next.

"We got to be in constant readiness," says Captain Hooft who believes that survival to a great extent depends on being aware, being alert and being ready. "We have a round the clock surveillance," he says explaining that a group of Dutch marines stand

guard all day and all night manning the outside weapons while a 50 man strong British airforce troupe, that joined the Zuiderkruis two weeks ago, man the two combat air crafts used for air surveillance.

Attentive monotony! Is this then the on board reality? 12 hours of work and 12 hours of rest interspersed with practise shoot outs and occasional breaks to savour the quiet. Living in a uniform in and out of duty, having access to mail only when the vessel reaches a port.... alienated from family and friends, living from one day to another not knowing and not having the time to wonder whether it's a Sunday, holiday or a beautiful off day... Acclimatising yourself with the dexterity of the Goalkeeper and the Oto melara but being immune to life beyond the great shores...

Not your grand idea of riveting adventure. But the crew aren't complaining. No, not even the 35 women who had to cast their femininity aside and don the unisex mantle of the naval rating. For the Zuiderkruis sans many of the familiar comforts of home is yet home to these 300-odd men and women, who have over the



COVER STORY



months adapted themselves to living in the close confines of a constantly moving abode and wrestling what comfort they could from the close comradeship of their colleagues. "It's not the same as living on land. But you learn to live with it," says Captain Hooft, who after having spent 25 years of life in the navy considers it to be just a way of life.

A way of life that is not totally macho. The presence of 35 female sailors, accepted on equal terms, in some ways pay testimony to the fact that the Dutch have done more for women's liberation than the rest of the world put together. "There is no preferential treatment for us," says Manuela explaining that women like men have to go through the same process and preliminaries when applying to join the Navy. "The only reason why there are more men than women in the navy is because most women don't like the navy," she adds.

On board the *Zuiderkruis*, the 35 women hold an interesting melange of positions from radar operation to administrative duties, medical and even tough macho work like pulling in the jackstay, cleaning of weapons. They also do their part in the round the clock defence watch. "All the positions are earned on merit," says Manuela.

The Dutch navy has had women aboard their vessels for over 10 years now. And although there is a current controversy over

having women in frontline positions, Captain Hooft doesn't see anything amiss in it. He doesn't think that having women aboard restricts their male freedom or puts a damper on their shipboard activities either. "We are used to having them around," he says.

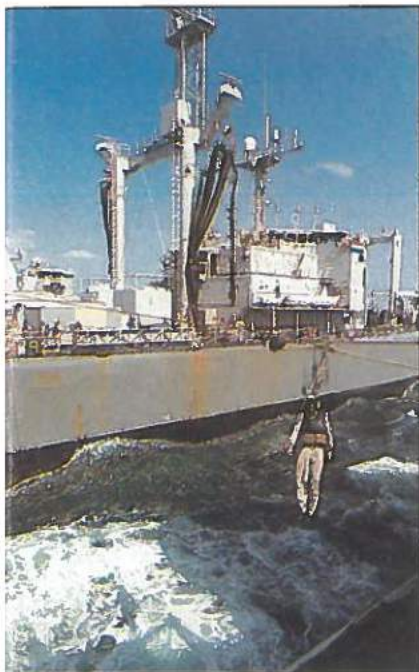
The women don't think any different either. "The men don't treat us any different. We are all colleagues. We are all friends," says Manuela Wibier, Assistant Supply Officer of the *Zuiderkruis*, who joined the navy because she liked to sail and then stuck to it for over six years because she liked the lifestyle the navy offered. She isn't bothered about the consequences of war or the battle raging over the questions of having women in frontline positions. "When I joined the navy I realised the dangers and accepted the consequence," she says.

So what does it really feel like, being a woman in truly male occupation? Doesn't she at times feel like chucking that mannish garb and donning something truly feminine and flowery just for the heck of it? "Not really," says Manuela explaining the ship's safety regulations that forbid skirts on deck. They are not supposed to wear rings or bangles either, also for safety reasons. "But we can wear cosmetics and have our hair styled any way we want to."

A way of life.... In this tapestry of constant motion, life is not the clerically regimentalised order you expect on board a navy vessel. Granted the discipline is there, as is protocol and respect for senior officers. But nobody



Top: Being a woman, doesn't mean being different. At the control room **Above left:** The Sea King helicopter all set and ready to take the journalists on a quick reconnaissance tour **(Centre)** Supply officer Manuela Wibier and a colleague **(Right)** Hurly burly Tim Oosteng, the chief cook on board who has been with the navy for the last 30 years



One of the Dutch reporters being transported via a jackstay from the Heemskerck to Zuiderkruis

unregimentalised long hair and pirate type earrings. "Perhaps we are the only navy that doesn't have any specific codes about hair," laughs Manuela. True the Dutch navy permits its male members to pierce their ears and to grow their hair as long as they wish. The Zuiderkruis has Sandy, the on board hair dresser to look after those unruly locks or to just chop them off.. what ever the sailor wishes.

Sandy also runs the vessel's novelty store that stocks everything from hair shampoo to candy and stationery.

stands at rigid attention every time the Captain passes by. Their's an easy, informal sodality bound together by mutual respect and understanding. "We respect each other's privacy and don't overstep the personal boundary," explains Manuela adding that neither an officer nor a subordinate can enter each other's messes without first asking for permission.

A way of life also means the touch of bohemianism that stands at odd with naval regulations and discipline. The very

Zuiderkruis, 169ft long and weighing over 800 tonnes, and equipped with up to date medical facilities including a team of officer level medical personnel, along with two frigates, *HNLM Jacob Van Heemskerck* and *Philips Van Almonde* arrived in Dubai in mid-December. They left the shores of Netherlands in mid- September to pit their might to help carry out the UN security council embargo and free Kuwait from the grips of Iraqi power.■



(Above) Sandy, the hair dresser: He cuts hair and sells candy

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