

When
minutes
last for
hours



O happy Land, where Mercy has chosen to dwell,
And pledge Her aid to Humanity,
Crying out for salvation.
O happy Land.

Poem written by Lucretia Wilhelmina van Winter-Van Merken upon the foundation of the Society.

When the Dutch Society for the Rescue of the Drowning was founded 250 years ago, it was by no means a natural response to try to save people who were in trouble in the water. If they died, was that not God's will? This attitude led to some curious rules, customs and superstitions. For example, the victim's legs had to be kept in the water. There was also a huge fear of taking responsibility. But the time was ripe for that to change. Taking God's will into man's own hands was typical of the spirit of the age, in which numerous clubs, societies and associations were established to study science and literature and to perform good works for the masses. Founded by a group of Amsterdam dignitaries, the Society for the Rescue of the Drowning was one such organisation. From now on, innkeepers and publicans were required to take in people saved from the water and give them a place to recover. The widespread fear of unconsciousness had to be dispelled. The Society publicised new methods to revive victims, even those showing no signs of life. Originally including such techniques as tickling the throat with a feather, administering emetics and even the insufflation of tobacco smoke by enema syringe, over time the resources and rescue packages distributed by the Society gradually became increasingly sophisticated.

All with positive results, it seems. Reliable national statistics have only been available from 1950, and since then the number of drownings has fallen dramatically. In the mid-twentieth century, in a country with a population of less than ten million, the water claimed more than 500 lives each year, many of them children. Today, that figure is around 80 out of a population of more than 16 million. Still too many, of course, but real progress! The great machine which has reduced the number of drownings in the Netherlands has many cogs, including education, swimming lessons, the Royal Netherlands Sea Rescue Institution (KNRM), the Royal Netherlands Lifesaving Society (KNBRD) and improved safety measures around lakes, ditches and waterways, but our organisation is certainly one

of them. Anyone who examines the files of cuttings in our archive will see how widely the Society's campaigns have hit home, with coverage everywhere from national media to street newspapers.

In the past, the medal presentations by mayors and local worthies were preceded by thorough investigation by a dense network of correspondents, who had to verify the reported rescues. Even now, the emergency services and eyewitnesses are called from our office in Amsterdam to check the facts. The Board then reviews every aspect of the incident at long, serious meetings. Was it a difficult rescue? How cold was the water? Was it light or dark? Were the rescuers amateurs or professionals? At one time, laureates might have been presented with a practical prize – a book, a course or even a cash reward – but nowadays we confine ourselves to ceremonial honours: a certificate or a bronze, silver or gold medal, depending upon the nature of the rescue. All to a design from 1767, the year of our foundation.

Historically, the rewards handed out by the Society were quite substantial in their worth. In tough times, you'd sometimes see attempts to collect a medal or payout twice by nominating the same rescue a second time. The stated purpose of the awards was to acknowledge an act of heroism, but ultimately they were intended primarily to encourage future rescuers – an extra incentive, as it were, to persuade them to actually jump into the water.

The ceremonies honouring rescuers are festive occasions. In many cases, the laureate is taken completely by surprise as they suddenly find themselves being congratulated by friends and family, with a dignitary relating the story of their heroism and ready with a medal. Such accounts always make an impression, not least by leaving their audiences shuddering at the idea of death by drowning. An educational experience. As you can read in this book, too, many of those stories are truly blood-curdling. But, we hope, they also press home the need to do something if you do encounter someone in difficulty in the water. After all, that is our goal as a Society: to encourage people to do the right thing in those few brief moments when minutes seem to last hours. Fortunately, they often do. Even despite our natural human fear of the water. Despite the fact that they know they might be putting their own life at risk to save someone else's. And despite the so-called bystander effect, a well-known psychological phenomenon in which people are less likely to enter the water if other onlookers also fail to act. Despite everything, some do dare to take the plunge.

The eyewitnesses, rescuers and victims in this book were all happy to talk about the moment they did take to the water or were saved from it. A traumatic memory perhaps, but in these cases always with good results. But not all those rescued did want to speak about the incident. Sometimes alcohol was involved, or a mistake on their part. Or they just want to put the whole event behind them. Victims are often racked by shame, even if the situation was totally beyond their control. The internet age has increased their vulnerability. Sketchy reports buzzing around on social media, and the reactions to them, can have a huge impact. As they did for Priscilla from Leidschendam, who did everything she could to keep her cargo bike and the children in it above water, but received hundreds of comments condemning her for being the most irresponsible mother on earth. She was devastated, she says.

The rescuers are usually the forgotten heroes in a near-drowning. While the emergency services are rushing the victim to hospital, they gather up their wet gear, are perhaps briefly taken care of at a nearby house, café or police station and then have to head home. For a shower. They sometimes never learn "their" victim's fate. Because of privacy rules, the police or hospital may be unable to pass on

any information. Recognition of the rescuer, with the aim of telling their stories and so encouraging future rescues, is therefore an important aim of our Society. As always with organisations set up to deal with misfortune, we hope that one day our work will be done. But until then the Society for the Rescue of the Drowning remains essential.

There is one small irony concealed in the stories in this book, and many others throughout our history. Rescuers quite often mention the absurd coincidence of it all, the chance combination of circumstances. "I was in the right place at the right time, but in fact I should have been somewhere else." It was a miracle, many say. Divine intervention. Providence. Two hundred and fifty years after our Society, a product of the Enlightenment, took God's will into its own hands, He has evidently not relinquished it entirely.

“Is this disaster meant for us?”

GROENEKAN, UTRECHT, 8 JULI 2013

Rescuers: Boban Braspenning and Jurriaan van Hout

Rescued: Bep van Haren

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SWIMMING, GOING OUT AND HOLIDAYS. Jurriaan and Boban, both 18, had just finished their final school exams and were celebrating the summer and their new-found freedom. That afternoon they put on their swimming trunks, jumped on their bikes and headed for the Maarsseveen Lakes via Groenekan and the forts of the New Holland Water Line. On the dyke leading to Fort Ruigenhoek, they suddenly heard someone shouting. “Help! Help!” The cries were coming from the reeds, where Bep van Haren, strapped into his mobility scooter, was slowly sinking to the bottom of a ditch. Boban remembers the fading sense of time – how slow everything suddenly seemed – and the air bubbles rising up and bursting on the surface of the water.

“For a very brief moment you think, ‘What should we do?’,” says Boban. “We looked around and saw that there was nobody else there. Your head works really slowly at times like that. Is this disaster meant for us? In a society like ours, you can barely imagine someone really being in such dire need. What happens in your head in those few seconds is very interesting.”

Jurriaan needed less time. He pulled the phone and wallet out of his pocket, threw them to the ground and jumped in. Boban followed a moment later. The water was deep, the scooter – a big one with handlebar and mirrors – very heavy. “The gentleman was stuck fast,” recalls Boban. “He was quite heavy himself, too, not some skinny old man. And if people don’t use their own muscles to help you, they become even heavier.”

“We had a brief interaction with the gentleman himself, but mainly we discussed what the two of us needed to do. We had to scramble a lot. The bank was steep and very slippery. Neither of us had ever taken a first-aid course. In fact, we had no idea what to do or how it all works. Once we’d pulled him out of the water, we laid him face down but that left him quite short of breath. We didn’t know what we were doing, though, and didn’t dare turn him over again. He looked deathly pale and felt very cold.”

“Everything you do at a moment like that is instinctive. You discuss a bit, go into action and whatever you do just happens. It’s not something you do rationally. It just happened to us, too. There’s an instinct in your head that kicks in.”

“We called the police straight away. They came after about half an hour, the ambulance a little later. In the meantime, other bystanders had provided help. Somebody had put a parasol over him so that he was in the shade.”

“When the police came, they asked us if we wanted to pull the scooter out of the water. Ha ha! We were already wet, they said. And we did it, too. Then we cycled off, soaking wet. But it was summer and we still wanted our swim. The great thing was that we’d agreed to meet up with some girls at the lakes. So we had a fantastic story to tell them!”

Boban talks about the incident as if it was all one big adventure. With a laugh, he remembers the media interest at the time. He even was interviewed on national radio, together with the victim’s wife. The newspapers were falling over each other to tell the story. “Clearly the silly season,” says Boban. “The gentleman and his wife thanked us profusely. We didn’t think anything of it, but everyone around us thought we had done something very special. It should be the most normal thing in the world. They called us heroes, but of course you don’t feel like that.”

“Without them, I wouldn’t be here to tell you about it,” a grateful Mr van Haren told a newspaper shortly after the accident. “On my own, I just couldn’t free myself from that scooter.” The fall left him with nothing more than a bruised rib. “I was shocked, but I’ve slept well since.” He was 86 at the time.

For Boban and Jurriaan, the rescue had one more a gratifying consequence. Not long afterwards, a couple of hundred euros were deposited in each of their bank accounts. Enough to pay for a well-deserved holiday. “You have to remember that I’ve known him since 1946,” said Mrs van Haren at the time. “That means that we’ve been through a lot together. I don’t want to lose him yet. I’m so happy that he’s still alive.”

Sadly, Mr van Haren died at the end of 2013 after suffering a broken hip. “It was a rich and intense life,” read his obituary notice.

Mrs van Haren would like to meet the boys again. Immediately after the accident, she offered them a beer during the interview with the newspaper. “It was strange,” she says. “We knew that spot very well. My husband was the third person to fall into the water there, and we even knew the previous one personally! His mobility scooter was taken to our neighbours’ place afterwards, like my husband’s. Since this accident, the council has finally modified the incline there.”

“You’re never really prepared”

DE GROOTE WIELEN, FRIESLAND, 18 JANUARY 2013

Rescuer: Johan Fonk and others

Rescued: Jurjen Rollman

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IT IS JANUARY 2017. We talk to Johan and Jurjen (pictured), rescuer and rescued, exactly four years after the events which first brought them together. Once again, a layer of ice has formed on the ditches and ponds. The whole nation is holding its breath. Will there be skating soon?

Johan lives near Leeuwarden. “I really enjoy skating,” he says. “A friend and I often skate to Dokkum, along the Bonkevaart canal. Backpack, an extra rope. I love it: that togetherness, with warm snacks and mulled beer, hot lemon and honey. It’s such a wonderful thing to do. That afternoon, I was at home with my daughter. We said to each other, ‘Come on, it’s nice weather. Let’s go out for a skate before dinner’. It was a Saturday afternoon, I think.” Jurjen lives a bit further away from town, in a small village where the road ends. The wood-burning stove is smouldering, and Jurjen is keen to talk. Together, he and Johan tell the story of that Saturday afternoon.

“It was a beautiful sunny day,” says Jurjen. “I’d given up smoking three months earlier. To keep that up, I walked around the village every day. Because it was such nice weather and people were skating further up the canal, I thought, ‘I could stroll round the village again, but I can also try the ice for a bit.’”

Johan packed his things together. “When I skate, I always take a backpack containing a first aid kit and thirty metres or so of rope with a carabiner so that someone can wrap it around themselves, under their armpits, to hang on to it. I’ve never had to use it before.”

When he reached De Groote Wielen lake, Jurjen inspected the ice. “I saw loads of gas bubbles. It was at least seven to eight centimetres thick. There were a lot of people skating. I walked across the ice to the other side of the lake. It was very slippery, so I thought, ‘I shouldn’t have done this – I’ll fall and break something’. Because of my bad knees, I hadn’t skated for years.”

Johan and his daughter were making a long run across the lakes. “Then I caught sight of a man in a very big yellow coat,” he remembers. “He was quite hard to miss. I said to my daughter, ‘He ought to watch out, because the ice is pretty weak there’. At one point I saw him again, this time on the bank. We skated on and he turned around and ventured back out onto the ice. Then I suddenly realised he was gone. And in the same instant I thought, ‘Damn, I’ve forgotten my rescue kit’. The one time I finally needed it, I’d left it in the car.”

“I turned back as soon as I reached the other side of the lake,” says Jurjen. “I was following exactly the same route. But then I fell through the ice, just like that. Straight down. I immediately threw up my hands, hit the bottom, pushed myself up and popped out again, shooting across the ice like a seal.” Jurjen remembers it vividly. “I started crawling, another fifteen or twenty metres. Then I thought, ‘I can stand up now’, but instead I fell straight through again. And here the ice was only about half a centimetre thick. I sank again, but this time I didn’t touch the bottom. I thought to myself, ‘How am I going to get out of this?’, but then I came up again, through the same hole.”

“After spending a little while feeling out the thin ice, I thought, ‘OK, this is it’. Is this why stopped smoking? Just to die under the ice three months later?”

Meanwhile, Johan was skating as fast as he could towards Jurjen. “We tried to tie our scarves together, but were unable to come close enough because the ice started cracking. Jurjen had a camera in his hand and was wearing glasses and a hat. He seemed pretty cold already and started shouting, ‘Help me, help me!’ He’d just happened to have fallen through the big ‘duck hole’ in De Groote Wielen lake. And that hole was growing bigger and bigger. The lake’s four or five metres deep there: you have to tread water. We couldn’t get a grip with those scarves.”

“My reflective coat saved me,” believes Jurjen. “A lot of people had seen me, and also noticed that I was suddenly gone. They were instantly alarmed. For me, it was very scary. Two boys approached, wanting to pull me out. But well, the ice was too thin. I told them, ‘Calm down, you’re not going to get me out. You can’t come close enough. You’ll just fall in yourselves, and then I’ll have your deaths on my conscience as well’. As for myself, I felt something like, ‘Well, this is it’. I’d come to terms with it. I thought, ‘Just enjoy the beautiful weather one last time and then off we go’. I’d once almost drowned during a swimming competition and that had left me with the feeling that drowning isn’t that bad. It’s the struggle against drowning which is really awful. You try to breathe, but you just can’t.”

“The ice kept breaking up,” continues Johan. Nevertheless, he did manage to come close enough to grab Jurjen’s outstretched hand. “But he was only getting heavier. I had 125 kilograms hanging onto my hand. His clothes were soaking up the water. And he was no longer able to tread water. He said, ‘Think of yourself, you’re young, leave me. I’ll let go... It’s fine...’ He meant it, too. That made a big impression on my daughter.”

Jurjen: “Then another skater turned up in an old tracksuit and woolly hat, like something out of the sixties, and he had an iron cord around his waist. They threw that to me and I was able to tie it round my waist.”

Johan: “We could already hear sirens coming and a few moments later we saw police officers with tow ropes. I said to them, ‘Stay back, really, because you’ll go through the ice, too’. But before the emergency services can do anything, they have to ensure their own safety, take precautions. There have to be frogmen present. A lot has to happen before they venture out onto the ice. But meanwhile you can very quickly suffer hypothermia in the freezing water. Some other people then found a tree

trunk, ten centimetres thick and a metre and a half long, so we threw him that tied to the policemen's rope and he was able to put his arm around it. Finally, we could really start pulling. Then we slowly dragged him back onto the ice."

Jurjen: "It was thanks to my weight that I avoided hypothermia. The only advantage of being fat is that you can hold out longer in cold water. On the other hand, a thin person probably wouldn't have fallen through in the first place. It felt like ages that I was being pulled through that breaking ice. At one point I had to say, 'Hey, stop!' And they did, too. I needed to catch my breath – I was exhausted. Then I lay down flat, feet up, as parallel as possible with the ice. I shot across it like a seal. The police wanted to throw another rope, but I just shouted, 'Carry on, carry on!' If I fall in again, I thought, it'll be the death of me."

"By the end of it you're dazed, wet, helpless," says Johan. "My daughter pushed me to the shore. We took off our skates, put on our shoes and then I drove home, showered and that was that. It was very intense, very emotional. I shed a lot of tears. But at the time you're so busy you don't feel any of that."

While Johan was warming up at home, Jurjen was in hospital. "I arrived with a body temperature of 32 degrees. After two-and-a-half hours I was up to 36 and they let me go home. Only in the car, with the heater on at full blast, did I really feel warm again. Nevertheless, the whole incident has left me feeling cold in my belly. It's just cold all the time. When I wake up on a winter's day, that sometimes gives me a start."

Johan heard the next day that Jurjen was doing well. "I think the closer you are to the victim, the greater the emotion and fear are. Many of the other rescuers were already out of sight before it had even really sunk in with me."

The two men met again a couple of weeks later. Jurjen visited his rescuer at home, bringing cake and a small gift by way of thanks. They also discussed what had happened. "He sat here at the table," Johan recalls, "tears rolling down his face as he talked about the tension, about how stupid it all was. He apologised, recounted the whole story, but he'd also forgotten a lot. He didn't remember much of what we'd said on the ice. He was in there for a good twenty minutes."

"I'd already learnt my main lesson from Discovery Channel," says Jurjen. "Only calm can save you. So always keep calm. What can you do? You can't make the ice thicker. If that man hadn't been there with his iron cord, I wouldn't be here now."

Some time later, Johan took a call from the town hall. "They effectively tricked me into coming in to receive the award. Lots of congratulations, a certificate, compliments. That was unique, in such beautiful surroundings. There were drinks, too, and we were served Frisian orange cake. Very nice. As far as I was concerned, the conversation with Jurjen was the end of it, but being given an award does add cachet to what you've done."

"It felt to me like everything took hours"

Klazienaveen, Drenthe, 6 oktober 2013

Rescuers: Bernie Peters and Vincent Prins

Rescued: Norah

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"I WANTED TO PLAY RACING CARS," says Norah, a happy little girl of seven. She was four when it happened, but her parents say she still remembers the accident as if it were yesterday. "Occasionally she says things like, 'Dad, it's a good thing I got out of that car, otherwise I'd still be lying there at the bottom of the canal. Then you'd be on your now!'"

Norah: "At school the girls thought it was a really exciting story. But the boys thought it was boring. I still like playing in the car, but the handbrake has to be on."

"It was a cold Sunday afternoon," recalls Norah's mother, Louise. "We'd been to my parents' house on the other side of the village. I just wanted to pop home to drop something off before we drove to our next appointment. Norah said, 'Oh, can I stay in the car? Behind the wheel?'" After a moment's hesitation, Louise thought, 'OK then. If I take out the keys, nothing can happen, right?' She was wrong.

The family lives alongside a canal in Klazienaveen, close to the country residence once home to the woman who gave their village its name, Klaziena Sluis. On the other side of the water is the Norit factory, maker of the famous charcoal tablets for travel diarrhoea. The drive in front of the house is on a slight incline, sloping down towards the street and the canal beyond. It would take a particularly skilful driver to guide a car between the trees and into the water about one and a half metres below, but that was exactly what Norah managed to do on that fateful Sunday.

"Climbing forward from the back seat," suspects Louise, "she probably stood on the handbrake and at the same time knocked the gearstick into neutral. I saw it happen as I was coming out of the house. The car rolled backwards, across the road and precisely between the trees. I was able to grab it and hang on, trying to stop it, but of course I couldn't. So I just screamed at the top of my voice: 'Help! Help! Help!' But it was Sunday afternoon. Who can hear you? Who can see you?" Louise is almost beside herself – it is not a tale she likes to repeat.

Just as the car disappeared through the trees and into the canal, Louise noticed that someone had in fact seen her and it. That, she hoped, meant that the emergency services would be called and a rescue operation launched, so without thinking twice she dived into the canal fully clothed – shoes and all. Swimming around the car, she was able to talk to Norah, who was still inside but incredibly calm. “She was even wearing her seatbelt! I told her to undo it and crawl back through the car to the boot.”

“It felt to me like everything took hours, but actually it was only four minutes. What I found frustrating was that there were quite a few people watching from the bank, but nobody was doing anything. I called out several times, ‘Do something! Fetch a hammer!’ Then a woman did come with a hammer, but I thought, ‘Why don’t you bring it here!’ I found out later that she couldn’t swim, but in the heat of the moment you’re angry with the whole world. Since I’d been on the drive, I’d lost control of myself. I was in total panic, but once I knew that someone was calling the emergency services and I was lying in the water with Norah, I was sure everything was going to be alright.”

Bernie, a painter from Klazienaveen (pictured left), had pulled up a little earlier. He was coming back from an event in Musselkanaal when he saw the commotion by the canal. “Vincent – although I didn’t know him then – was standing to one side. I went up to him and just said, ‘And you’re going to help!’”

Vincent was in his Sunday best – he’d been on his way to celebrate his father’s birthday – but he jumped in without hesitation. “We swam over with the hammer. How we got there, I don’t remember. But I do know that it turned out to be useless. You should have seen Vincent: he was hammering and hammering, with all his strength. He was completely knackered. But nothing happened with the window.” As a painter himself, Bernie knows how tough glass can be. “You can throw a tile at a window pane and it won’t break. So then I swam back and called to his wife to fetch a rescue hammer from the car. That shatters it in no time.”

Bernie carefully pulled Norah out of the car and handed her to her mother. She was so tired that he then had to carry the little girl to the canal bank, where he passed her to a policeman. “For me that was the end of it. I undressed, drove home as quick as I could and took a hot shower.”

The incident itself lasted just four minutes, but for Norah and her parents that was only the beginning. “Norah would sometimes have panic attacks,” says her father. “She had the fear of death in her eyes. I was reversing the car two days after the accident and her eyes widened, her little face went pale and she became totally hysterical. I had to stop and take the bike instead. That cut me to the bone. And I used up a lot of petrol endlessly driving her around until she felt right in the car again, gently convincing her that it was OK.”

“At some point you have to let it go,” says Louise. “Not become stuck in the past. In a way, we were really lucky. The car landed perfectly in that canal – it could also have turned upside down. Fortunately, it all ended well. So let’s not go back over all the what-ifs.”

Many people have asked Louise if she feels guilty. “No,” she replies. “I know in my own heart that I’m a good mother. This could happen to anyone. But if it doesn’t happen to you, you sometimes don’t think that way. The media interest was very unpleasant. You’ve only just been through it all, so you’re pretty emotional. Straight after it happened, I changed my clothes and when I came downstairs again there was already a camera pointing at the house. I hadn’t even had a chance to call my husband! We were bombarded with annoying and suggestive questions. In the papers there were articles that were

totally inaccurate. I suddenly noticed that I was more frequently questioning reports in the media. Were things really like they said, or different? And they were very tenacious. They would call our neighbours to try to contact us. Really ridiculous.”

After a hot shower and a cup of tea, Bernie decided to cycle back to the scene of the accident. He joined the crowd still standing there. Nobody recognised him. The car was hoisted out of the water. Around him, Bernie heard increasingly wild stories. For example, that four people had been pulled out of the car just in the nick of time.

The very next day, both Bernie and Vincent received a cinema token and a bunch of flowers from Louise and Norah. The insurance company offered to fully reimburse their damaged clothes. With a bonus payment on top, because it was so impressed by their heroism.

“It was an accident,” Louise concludes. “You can’t prevent everything, whatever people might say. But it does have a huge impact. Afterwards, all our friends and acquaintances checked that they had one of those hammers in their car. I think there were a lot of sales in our village that week. As for myself, my heart still skips a beat whenever we’re near water or park close to it. It was a really unpleasant experience, but we mustn’t talk ourselves into turning it into a trauma. I don’t want to be controlled by fear, and that’s also the attitude I want to pass onto my daughter. After the first two weeks, she regained her confidence as well and hasn’t suffered any lasting effects.”

“I’m going to save him, whatever it takes”

HANSSUM MARINA, NEER, LIMBURG, 26 AUGUST 2016

Rescuer: Ben Sijben

Rescued: Andries de Groen

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CLOSE TO A SCENIC BEND IN THE RIVER MAAS, amidst picturesque countryside and a cluster of gravel lakes, lies Hanssum Marina. Ben and Andries (pictured left) are both members. It is a fairly small club. When the river level rises, the boats and jetties rise with it. Andries and Ben are unhappy that the flood wall is due to be raised because of the increased risk of inundation. That is going to block their view of the boats from the clubhouse.

Andries is a retired doctor, Ben a forty-year-old farmer, with both livestock and arable land. Andries is also a sailor. He has owned a traditional boat, one without leeboards, since 1980. Sailors, he says, are not like water skiers and motor-boat owners. “They fly over the water, and we go chug chug chug.”

Ben has a motor boat.

Together with their wives, the two men are drinking coffee on the clubhouse terrace.

Like many of the rescuers in this book, Ben is not a professional emergency responder. But he is a man prepared: he holds a first-aid certificate and has taken a resuscitation course. Andries, by contrast, has saved many people over the course of his life. He was the local GP; his brother did the same in a neighbouring village. “If you have an accident out here, a long way from town,” says Andries, “it takes a while for an ambulance to come.” The local doctor often reaches the scene earlier, so he has experienced enough nasty accidents and life-and-death situations in his time. But he never thought for a moment that the roles might one day be reversed.

“We’d had a wonderful day,” he explains. “My wife and I had taken a long swim on a beautiful lake near here. We’d just arrived back, unrigged the boat and been chatting with some of the other sailors. Then I walked away, stumbled, fell, hit my head on the jetty and rolled into the water in front of Ben’s boat. At least, that’s what must have happened – I don’t remember a thing.” Andries’ wife nods, then

gestures towards Ben. “And he went straight in after him. At that point I didn’t think he needed to, because Andries is a good swimmer. But he didn’t surface, and neither did Ben. That was when I started feeling really anxious.”

“He fell forwards into the water,” says Ben. “I didn’t know if he was unconscious. But I did know that he might need help. So I jumped in. I could hardly see anything under the water. I could swim, but in a situation like this you run short of air very quickly. Then my mind started spinning. Should I dive to the bottom and search there, or come back up? In the hope that he’d surfaced, so did I, but he wasn’t there. So I went under again. At that point you start thinking and wondering and feeling and searching and looking to see where he might be. He was wearing a colourful shirt. That was how I spotted him, deep in the water: it’s about 3.5 to 4.5 metres deep there. The first part is easy; you bring someone up with you thanks to the upward current. Because of that I was able to lift him and grab the jetty and the boat which was moored there. My wife Monique helped, and when the harbour master came the three of us managed to pull him up together, waiting for more help. Then all of a sudden Andries came around. Very quickly, as if nothing had happened.”

“I don’t remember that at all,” Andries repeats a number of times. “But Ben went down at least three or four metres to bring me up. As far as I’m concerned, it’s a great achievement that he was so determined to bring me up from the bottom. That really is very deep for an untrained swimmer. I always think to myself that it would have been better if Ben had fallen into the water, because I’d have pulled him out much more easily. But what he did was fantastic. He must have thought, ‘I’m going to save him, whatever it takes’. Otherwise he would never have found me. He did a great job, luckily for me.

“You were pretty calm,” Ben tells Andries. “You asked me what I was doing there, why I was holding onto you. We supported you, but in fact you were able to climb out by yourself, via the boat.”

“And he doesn’t remember anything about that, either,” remarks Andries’ wife.

“I was so glad once we were off that jetty,” says Ben. “It meant the immediate danger had passed. Once we were up on the terrace, the paramedics took over – despite loud protests from this gentleman here. He felt fine – he just wanted to go home. But he kept on asking why he’d fallen into the water, so we had a feeling things weren’t right.”

“The whole incident probably lasted three or four minutes. That meant that Andries was pulled out of the water just in time, according to the ambulance crew. It’s called the ‘golden five’: any more than five minutes under water and you have a serious problem.”

“I only properly came round at the hospital,” says Andries. “I knew immediately which ward I was – I’ve brought in plenty of patients when an ambulance was understaffed. My brother explained what was going on and what had happened to me. I’d lost consciousness again in the ambulance. Before I woke up at the hospital, they’d already checked everything: heart, head, brain. I’d contracted pneumonia because of the water, so I was taken to the intensive care unit.”

Ben was quite unsettled by the whole incident. When it was all over, he went out boating again to sort out his mind. Then he discovered a strange coincidence. “I never empty my pockets, but just before Andries fell into the water I’d put my wallet, keys, telephone and everything in the cabin. As if I felt that dive coming.” Out on the water, he drank some beers with friends. “The strange thing was that I didn’t even know Andries’ name. You often see that on TV, that they want to trace a hero or a rescuer. So I thought something like, ‘I need to find out his name’.”

Ben realises that his rescue was touch and go. "I did my best, sure, but if I'd failed I'd have been left with a trauma now. There is one detail I like: I don't have even a basic swimming certificate. At primary school, two of the boys weren't able to swim out of their depth and I was one of them. Back then, that just didn't interest me. My love of water only came much later. I'm a good swimmer now, but I've never before had proof that I can do it to rescue standard."

"So you really did act purely instinctively?," asks Andries' wife.

"Yes," Ben replies, "I had a little bit of knowledge but I used it well."

The day after the accident, Andries' wife went looking for Ben. In the rush, they had failed to exchange any details. But they are members of the same club, so he was easy enough to find. They went back through the previous day's events.

"That you came the next day," Ben tells her, "while Andries was still so ill – I thought that was a lovely thing to do. Three weeks after that, once Andries had recovered, you both came again and we went out to dinner. That evening was far too short. At the end, Andries said, 'I hope we remain friends. You're not going to become sailors and we're not going to be water skiers, but there's a link between us now and we have to maintain that'."

"Looking back," says Ben, "what I'm most proud of is being able to act so quickly. You don't normally find yourself in that kind of situation. You have people who spring into action and people who don't. You can't blame anyone who doesn't. But fortunately I did spring into action." Andries believes that you should always put your safety first. "But Ben didn't do that. He dived straight in. Anything could have happened. He sacrificed his own safety for me."

"You have to go in now, otherwise she won't make it"

GRONINGEN, 26 SEPTEMBER 2014

Rescuer: Marjolein Russchenberg

Rescued: unknown

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IT IS ALMOST INEVITABLE IN A LAND OF WATER, with so many university towns criss-crossed by canals, rivers and other waterways. Topsy or worse, and often in a boisterous mood, late at night the students stumble homewards, or towards the next pub, across historic bridges and along often unprotected quays. Things have to go wrong from time to time, you might think, and indeed they do.

The Society's archives are full of them: countless near-drownings in which people pull locals and tourists from city waters with hooks, branches, masts or whatever else comes to hand. Or jump in after them. Also making regular appearances in our annals are high-spirited youngsters taking "a quick dip" in a treacherous canal. And then there are those with full bladders. Often unsteady on their feet after a night out, they find it all too easy to topple forward as they try to relieve themselves into the water. In Amsterdam alone, an average of eighteen people die in that way each year.

If you do run into problems, the chances that a Marjolein will be on hand to save you are not that great. Marjolein is 21 years old and studying physiotherapy in Groningen. She is also a superfit water-polo player, so she knows how to deal with heavy, uncooperative people in the water. In the past she has worked as a lifeguard at a swimming pool. No-one could be better qualified when there is a life to be saved. So much so that when local radio reported that a corpse had been found in a Groningen canal, friends texted to ask, "Hey Marjo, where were you?"

Luckily, Marjolein was there one September night in 2014. Walking home at 3.45am, by chance she made a quick detour to pick up a friend's moped. She had left the pub early, by Groningen standards, because she did not feel like drinking too much and had plenty to do the next day. In front of a bar on the Schuitendiep canal, she had stopped to chat with a friend when she heard a loud splash behind

her. "I immediately went over to see what was going on," she recalls. "The strange thing is that the girl was already floating in the middle of the canal. She must have really jumped for some reason – you don't end up there if you just fall. And the fence on the bridge is quite high."

More and more people were gathering along the canal, calling out to the girl in the water. "Come on out! Swim to the bank!" But nobody was actually doing anything. "Eventually I thought, 'She isn't going to make it'. So I took off my shoes and shirt, because I wanted to keep as much dry as possible. I was planning to take off my trousers, too, but then I thought, 'You have to go in now, otherwise she won't make it'. She was lying face down in the water, with her head and legs just hanging there. I handed my phone to some random boy next to me and jumped in. I swam over as quickly as I could and pulled back her head. I heard a really deep breath and only then did I know: she's still alive."

Many of the onlookers were stunned by the scene unfolding in front of them. Marjolein's friend was still busy talking and completely failed to notice that she had jumped into the water. The boy holding her phone was a bit unsteady on his feet. Everyone else was tired, tipsy or drunk, in fact, so her decisive action stood out a mile.

Marjolein grabbed the victim from behind and, "using the water polo stroke", pushed her over to the quay wall before lifting her from underneath so that she could be dragged onto dry land. Then she was pulled out of the water herself. It was only later, in daylight, that she discovered there was a ladder close by.

The police praised Marjolein's action. People who are drowning often try to drag their rescuers underwater, one officer told her. "Mwaa," she replied. "I'm used to water polo." Back on the quay, the victim was sitting on a nearby bench. A bystander had put a warm coat around her. "I never saw her face," says Marjolein. "It was dark. And when I called the police the next day to find what had happened to her, I was told that she didn't want any contact with me. They wouldn't give me her phone number."

Marjolein put her clothes back on and decided to go straight home to warm up. She felt very detached from it all, she says, not least because the ambulance crew talked to her like she was a small child. "Maybe they assume that everyone's drunk at that time of night, and has to be treated accordingly."

"A little while later we met the mayor. My father, a policeman, had come all the way from Rijswijk. He was very proud. Because the victim didn't want to talk or thank me, the ceremony was kept low-key. Without the press, even. Maybe it was a suicide attempt, I don't know. In cases like that, they never make things too festive just to be sure."

"I would do it again," Marjolein says. "It wouldn't be my first choice, but once I realised that nobody else was doing anything I knew it was up to me. It still strikes me how few people actually took any action there. As if they all thought, 'Let's just wait a bit longer'."

"You never forgive yourself..."

EMMELOORD, FLEVOLAND, 14 SEPTEMBER 2014

Rescuer: Jeroen van Ravenhorst

Rescued: Kevin

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IT IS THE AGES WHICH FIRST JUMP OUT AT YOU when you open any random annual report from the Society for the Rescue of the Drowning. Take 1965, for example: two years old, two-and-a-half, eight, two-and-a-half, six, five, two, three, one-and-a-half, two... On and on it goes. All children who slipped out of view for a moment, were playing in the wrong place, fell through ice that was too thin, cycled into the water – you name it. It is every parent's worst nightmare, but it happens so often. An unfortunate consequence of living in a country with so much water, where even many residential areas are bisected by waterways and the most modern new housing estates are built around ponds and other bodies of water.

But something has changed for the better. Perhaps it is a realisation of the danger water poses. Perhaps it is the speed with which bystanders act. In any case, Statistics Netherlands reports that the number of children drowning each year has fallen from about 300 in 1950 to just 9 in 2016. An unbelievable drop. And an incredible amount of sadness people have been spared. Because even if things do not end in tragedy, the impact on a family can be huge.

Simone from Emmeloord knows all about that. On 14 September 2014, her family had just returned from holiday. She and her husband went to pick up the dog from the neighbours who had been looking after it, while the children ran off to see friends nearby. "They live on the south bank of the Urkervaart canal," says Simone. "I was always dead scared of the water there." As Simone was catching up with her neighbours, a few doors down Jeroen was startled by a little boy rushing into his house and shouting that a friend was lying in the water.

"I didn't think twice," Jeroen recalls. "I almost literally flew over to the water, well in front of the boy. But I couldn't see any trace of anyone in the water. I was running back and forth, and then I suddenly

saw some air bubbles. I immediately dropped onto the quay and spotted the mere shadow of a white shirt under the water. I just managed to grab it, and that's how I pulled him out. With one arm."

The little boy was completely green, covered with vegetation. Luckily, he started coughing up water straight away. But otherwise he was completely out of it. Still stunned by the incident, Jeroen says, "A little further on, people were just watching from their front gardens. As if nothing was wrong. I yelled at them to call the emergency services. 'What is it?,' they called back. Well, I almost exploded. 'I've got a little kid lying here and you haven't seen anything? Do something, damn it!'" Only then did neighbours start coming over to help Jeroen and the green boy. At first sight, nobody seemed to recognise him. Not until what seemed like ages later did a woman say, "My God, that's my son".

"Someone called out that there was a child in the water," says Simone. "But I didn't recognise him at all. He was completely green. He'd been thrashing about for dear life and become completely entangled in the weeds. I was panicking because I'd been looking for him. The emergency operator said that we had to put him on his side. There was still a lot of water coming out of him. In all that time, he never responded. Only in the ambulance did he regain a bit of consciousness. He really was in complete shock. The paramedics told Jeroen that he had arrived in the nick of time. A moment later and things would have been very different."

It became clear later that the young friends had argued over a stick, which they were pretending was a fishing rod. Simone: "They both started pulling at it," Simone explains, "and Sem, his friend, accidentally pushed Kevin into the water. Sem then immediately rushed to find help. In a way it's a good thing it happened that way round, because Kevin isn't so decisive. He would have stood by the water, wondering what to do, whereas Sem ran immediately to Jeroen's place, which was closer than ours. And then he reacted very quickly. We would probably never have found Kevin again."

"Kevin has always been attracted to water," Simone continues. "He likes fishing, swimming, playing near water. With hindsight, of course you can say I should have stayed in my front garden to keep an eye on him. It can all go wrong so quickly. Personally, I've been mildly traumatised by it all. But not Kevin, fortunately. He had just had his first swimming lesson. Because he loves water so much, I wanted him to learn at a young age." After the accident, the pool advised Simone to continue his lessons. "We had a fantastic teacher. For the first few months, Kevin clung to him like a monkey. Even when the teacher put his arms right up in the air, Kevin kept hanging on. Until one day he let go and started swimming by himself. Since then on he's been better and better, and now he loves being around water again."

"Simone and Kevin came round the next day with a big bunch of flowers," says Jeroen. "Later, they nominated me for the medal. Simone asked if I'd suffered any losses because of the rescue, anything they should compensate me for, but even if I had that wouldn't have bothered me. The life of a child is more important than anything else."

Jeroen now has his own five-year-old. "I always say, 'If you play by the water, I'll break your legs'. So it has affected me, this incident. When I see other children playing along the water, I send them away or take them to their parents and make them say what they've been doing. Most parents don't pay proper attention. Kids are quick. You only need to be distracted for a moment and it's all over. They're in the water and that's that."

Jeroen is an experience richer. "I keep a closer eye on things now. You can never forgive yourself if something goes wrong. And it's just like with everything else: something has to happen before you start worrying about it. But that's shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted."

"That one second counts"

ON THE A15 MOTORWAY NEAR VUREN, GELDERLAND,

10 AUGUST 2015

Rescuers: Dann Bode (pictured), Erik Stap, Salim Ben Saïd, Ad Smits, Chris Niemeijer, Sander Kuiters and Remy Scheringa

Rescued: Sander Krijnen

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"GOSH," SAYS DANN, "IT'S A SHAME TO HEAR THAT. If only I'd stopped just a bit earlier and turned around." "But you were there and you saved me," says Sander. "And I'm eternally grateful to you for that."

On 10 August 2015, 28-year-old Sander was driving on the A15 motorway near Vuren when he suffered an epileptic fit and lost control of his car, ending up in a ditch. The vehicle flipped onto its roof and Sander lost consciousness. He remembers nothing. The hospital kept him in an artificial coma for a week and a half, and when he did finally wake up it was into a nightmare. "You drift in and out of consciousness," he explains. "You know there's something wrong, but you don't understand it at all. At one point I was awake, only I had something in my throat. I was throwing up constantly. That was really terrible. I could also barely speak properly, while I had so many questions. Not knowing what was going on was a huge frustration."

"Sander, how are you!" Dann rushes into Sander's flat, full of expectation. They shake hands and look at one another with a smile. Victim and rescuer. They were both keen to meet again, more than a year and a half after the accident. For Sander, the events of that day and their aftermath still dominate his life. Dann drives past the scene on a daily basis. And the same questions always go through his mind. Would he still have done it if the weather was icy? What if he had been just a little earlier?

Dann was not Sander's only rescuer. A lot of other people stopped to help. They included Erik from Ophemert, Salim from Rotterdam, Ad from Dalem, Chris from Asperen, Sander from Hendrik Ido Ambacht and Remy from Delft. All took part in the rescue effort and all received awards from the Society.

It was at the presentation ceremony that Sander saw his rescuers for the first time. "On the way there I thought, 'I'm about to meet the men who saved me'. All complete strangers to each other, but we're here to support others. When the rescuers met again for the first time, I realised what an impact the incident had had on them."

"It was an unusual situation with very different types of people," says Dann. "There was a lorry driver who pulled up, ran across the motorway and jumped into the ditch. There was a soldier who resuscitated Sander, a young man who did something else. That really is special: people completely unknown to each other who can suddenly work together. You don't know them, but now you all share an experience. It was great to meet again and talk to each other."

Of all the rescuers, Dann was the one who took the most decisive action by leaping into the water as fast as possible and directing the others who joined him. "The gentleman who'd been driving right behind Sander and saw it happen just froze," says Dann. "He later apologised because he couldn't help. He was upset about that. That preoccupied me for a long time. Why does one person act and another does nothing?"

Dann was driving home on his motorbike that day. He was in a hurry: the weather was lovely, a warm 25 degrees. Dusk was slowly beginning to fall, with a beautiful sun setting below the horizon. "When I drove past the accident, I thought, 'Woah, those people there aren't doing a thing'. It was the kind of thing you read about in the newspapers. And then I thought, 'Well, I have to do something, even though I have no relationship with these people'. As I was undressing, I was thinking of myself first. A motorcycle jacket is heavy, and so are the boots. Especially if they fill up with ditchwater. It was a dirty, stinking ditch, too, and I was sinking slowly into the mud. But OK, that's how it goes."

The car was lying in a small shallow water and the central locking had sealed it off from the outside world. Dann was unable to open anything. Then he panicked. People were standing on the bank, watching, and he was in the ditch with an upside-down car. Only after several minutes – "It felt like a very long time" – was Dann able to smash a window with a rescue hammer someone had passed to him. Other people were standing on the car to try to turn it over, so that the right compartment would be out of the water.

"And then I felt Sander for the first time. Which was strange, because you're handling the limp body of someone who might already be dead. Someone who's been under water for three or four minutes has a lot of water in their lungs. Because I'm also a diving instructor alongside my job with the Royal Marechaussee police, I know what kind of problems that can cause."

Together with other rescuers, Dann was able to pull Sander's almost lifeless body out of the car. Once he saw that people were taking care of the resuscitation, he could relax for a moment. Until he suddenly realised that Sander might not have been alone. "So I jumped back into the ditch and went to search the car. I could see that the front passenger seatbelt hadn't been used, but then something floated to the surface. I was really shocked because I thought it was a child seat. Surely there wasn't child in the back, who I hadn't spotted?"

That image of a child seat – in fact, it was probably a bag – still keeps Dann awake at night. And in his sleep he finds himself struggling repeatedly with that limp 70-kilogram body. Fortunately, the Royal Marechaussee has teams providing expert psychological support to personnel who have undergone a serious accident or other traumatic experience. "You may well suffer flashbacks or loss of concentration," says Dann. "I don't think you receive such good follow-up care as a rescuer in civilian life."

Dann was very curious afterwards to know how it had all ended. He was told by the police that Sander's condition was critical but stable, and that he was being kept in a coma. "I was shocked by that. I was worried that, in spite of all our efforts, we might not have done quite well enough."

Sander was found to have suffered oxygen deprivation while in the water, and once out of his coma had to begin a long journey of rehabilitation. One he is still on. He had to learn to walk again, and to function socially. He still suffers concentration problems and memory loss. The first social worker he spoke said that these symptoms were normal and could last six months. But they have now been going on for a year, which is regarded as a critical threshold: after that long, the chances of making a full recovery become smaller and smaller. Sander recently joined a employment reintegration programme, doing part-time administrative work at a level far below his previous jobs. "It's slow and simple," he says, with regret in his voice. "What I'm going to do in the future still isn't clear, but I'm going to make a go of it. I'm only thirty – I have my whole life before me."

"Because of what I've experienced, I appreciate the little things in life a lot more. I'm so happy I can sit here now. And even though I don't remember the accident, I still think about it every day. Not that I dwell on how terrible it all is. I do realise just how lucky I've been. That I am still here is thanks to you, Dann. Physically, I'm fine apart from two scars. I look at it like this: I had an accident, but since then I've had only luck. It's good thing it happened in August and the water wasn't freezing. That it wasn't December or January."

Dann corrects him. "For you, warm water was a bad thing. If you're drowning, you hold out longer in cold water. At a lower body temperature, your brain needs less oxygen. There are stories of people who've lain in icy water for twenty minutes and survived." He pauses. "It feels good to have saved someone. But when you tell me you still haven't fully recovered, I think that's a shame. It makes me want to have been there sooner."

"But I am still alive," says Sander.

"That's the difference between you and me, in the way we see things. You say, 'I'm still alive'. I would've liked more than that."

“You have to take the sea seriously”

VLISSINGEN, ZEELAND, 10 JUNI 2012

Rescuers: Brandon and Mitchell Bakker

Rescued: Gezinus Klasens

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WHENEVER A STORM RAGES, THEY GO OUTSIDE FOR A CLOSER LOOK. Brothers Brandon, 21, and Mitchell, 18, grew up by the sea. When they were very young, their father held them tightly. Later, they ran at his side in the gales. Now they always go alone. Sometimes they head for the storm-surge tunnel at the Keizersbolwerk, where the water can spray spectacularly. The sea and its immense strength were an integral part of their upbringing. They talk about it passionately.

“People underestimate the power of water,” says Brandon. “Even a shallow layer can be strong enough to drag you away. In the summer, a lot of tourists come here to sit on the beach. They watch the large ships sailing just offshore, less than 50 metres away. But the large waves they cause can overwhelm bathers and pull them out into the channel.”

“You also have tourists who come here for storms. That’s fun for them. In some places you can view the wildest of weather safely, but on the narrow stretches of dyke you’re easily inundated. The sea wall is wide here, so it can’t do you much harm, and there are benches to hold onto. But not over there. There the water can drag you in, just like that.”

It was their father who gave the brothers their most important lesson. Always keep your eyes on the water – never turn your back on it. And even then things can sometimes go wrong. “I was fishing once,” Mitchell recalls, “and I turned around – which I shouldn’t have done – and then all of a sudden a pilot vessel sailed past. Those boats sail really quickly, but right at that point they enter the harbour and slam on the brakes. So I was standing there with my back to it when the wave came. It swept away all my fishing equipment, and me with it. Then you think, ‘Oops, I wasn’t taught that’. At the same time, it’s fun as well. We know what’s likely to happen to you in certain places. Where you can be carried away by the current. Visitors can’t judge that so well.”

The knowledge Brandon and Mitchell had acquired at an early age came in handy on 10 June 2012. At about four in the afternoon, Gezinus, a man of nearly 50, went for a dip in the Western Scheldt near Vlissingen. Caught by the cold water and the strong current, he was soon in trouble.

“I’d seen the three of them before,” says Brandon. “They’re familiar figures around here, fishermen who often drink beer by the bunker. I’d already noticed that they were being boisterous and unruly. I said to my brother, ‘Keep an eye on them’. Sometimes the police pass by for a look – they’re ‘known’ to them. As such, there was nothing untoward about the situation. It was just normal. But then suddenly they ripped off their clothes, and one of them ran into the sea in his underpants.”

If you go into the water at that point, the boys explain, you are actually walking or swimming between two moles. At high tide, as now, they are invisible. The sea wants to pull you out from between them, but once you are beyond the mole and out in the main channel, you are not going to make it out.

Brandon: “I said to my brother, ‘Let’s wait, but if he screams we’ll call the emergency services’. A couple of minutes later he started calling for help. He was unable to make it out of the water – he was already past the mole. That’s when I said, ‘Call now, otherwise he’ll drown!’ So Mitchell called right away. It took quite a while before they came.”

Mitchell: “Yes, but that’s always the case at moments like that. Time seems to slow down. I tried to pass him a stick to pull him out of the water with, but that didn’t work.” Only after several people had called did the emergency services spring into action. “By then he had swum here, to the end of the mole, and was holding onto the rocks. He was still screaming for help. In the end he was fished out by a lifeboat.

“The police wanted to talk to us about what exactly had happened. They gave the victim a real dressing down, because obviously he’s not a tourist. He was probably fined, but I’m not sure about that. In any case, he got himself into real trouble with that drunken head of his, so really it’s his own fault a bit.”

“We’ve seen a lot of near-drownings and I’m sure we’ll see plenty more. People used to think of the sea as something you live with. Nowadays, they see it more as a leisure facility. But you have to take the sea seriously.”

No one knows that better than someone born and bred in Zeeland. The region’s history has been shaped by great storms and floods. In Vlissingen alone, the Society has awarded numerous certificates and medals to rescuers over the years. It takes only a glance at our map of incidents to see that the sea there poses a permanent risk, whether you are walking in the surf, swimming, kiting or surfing.

They know about the rescue at the hostel where victim Gezinus often stays, but they have not seen him for some time. All our attempts to find out his side of the story came to nothing.

“The best coaches are in the stands”

LEIDSCHENDAM, ZUID HOLLAND, 17 OKTOBER 2016

Rescuers: Andre Krens, Rosalina Nieuwenburg, Henk van de Sande

Rescued: children Xaniel, Aydan, Djaylana and Ashley

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HENK AND ANDRÉ OFTEN SIT THERE, on the River Vliet between Leiden and Leidschendam. It is a beautiful stretch of water. But since that day they are different. More alert. Whenever Henk sees a cargo bike coming, he always gives André a nudge. “Look out, mate, there’s another one.” The mere sight of it brings back the events of that day. Events which so affected everyone concerned that a lot of different versions have been doing the rounds, including plenty of tall tales, much to the chagrin of the actual protagonists.

It was a Monday. Priscilla from Leidschendam was on her way back from visiting a horse farm on the Vliet, near Leiden, with her own baby and toddler and two children of the same ages she was babysitting. The kids were tired from all the activity and impressions and Priscilla was looking forward to home, a sandwich and an afternoon nap. She was cycling along the narrow road alongside the river, where the cars drive like crazy. “You have to keep as far to the right as you can to avoid being hit,” she says. “Then I ran over a stone on the road and lost control of the bike. Because I was braking hard, I slid right across the grass verge between the road and the water. I’d already started calling for help. Then we went into the water. I totally panicked and thought it was all over. When I came back to the surface, I realised that I was still holding the bike. Fortunately, because the water’s very deep there.”

What happened next was very unusual. Priscilla’s eldest daughter and her friend, both five, also surfaced, hand in hand. They had held hands rather than pushing each other under the water, which is what children often do in such a situation. “At least they were above water,” says Priscilla. “They tried to lean on me, but I was still holding the bike and I thought, ‘Hell, there are two more kids down there, strapped into their child seats’. I had to make a choice. Do I leave these two splashing about in

the hope that they survive, or do I help them over to the bank and let go of the bike with the babies in it. In the end I chose to leave the older children to their own devices. Then I dived under, but I couldn’t see a thing. The water was dirty and murky. I was convinced the little ones were going to die. I could feel the cargo compartment, but not the kids. I came up again, then went down and came back up one more time. By now the two older children were tiring in the water. I started shouting again. Everything seemed to be taking so long, but as I found out later Henk and André were already on their way. They paused on the bank for a moment, then pulled out the older kids. I was thinking, ‘Why aren’t you coming in?’ Of course, they were thinking, ‘What a stupid woman! Why are you still hanging onto that bike? Why don’t you just save yourself?’”

Priscilla shouted that there were still two babies under the water. By now, minutes had passed. As he was running over, André had already pulled off his suit and shoes and so was able to jump straight into the water. He managed to find solid ground under his feet, close to the bank, so that he and Priscilla could turn the bike the right way up. “He was able to pull out the kids and hand them to me. I thought we’d lost them. It was terrible – I’ll never forget that moment. The sight of a limp, deathly-pale baby with only the whites of its eyes visible – I’ll never get that out of my head. I thought, ‘They’re gone’. All sorts of things went through my mind. About my own children, but also about the ones I was babysitting. How do I tell their parents? How can I answer to them?”

“The older children were out very quickly,” says André. One of them even shouted, ‘Oh no, my shoes! I’ve just got new shoes!’ But those child seats took some pulling. The babies started coughing up water as soon as I brought them out.” In the meantime, Henk had stopped a car being driven by Rosalien and asked her to help. “She looked after the babies,” says André, “and brought them round. I had to spend five minutes stretched out on the grass. I was completely devastated by the exertion and the nerves.”

The quick action by Priscilla, the two men and later Rosalien saved all four children’s lives. Rosalien warmed up her car to help the young victims recover as they waited for the police and ambulance. The two older children were able to go straight home. The babies had inhaled a lot of water and had to spend two days under observation in hospital.

“When I got home to my wife, I started sobbing,” says Henk. “The emotions all came flooding out.” For André, they had already come. In his car, changing into new overalls before facing the police and the television crews, he found he needed a moment of silence, alone with his tears. Four young lives which could have disappeared right before his eyes.

Henk and André became national heroes. In fact, their story went all round the world. “Later that same week we were back here, fishing again,” André recalls. “when this big Rhine barge sailed past. The skipper opened up his window and shouted, ‘Hey, heroes’. He gave us a thumbs up and sounded his foghorn. That was great!”

“It feels good,” says Henk, “because the children are doing well.” André and Henk still fish on the river as often as they can. And now with free fishing licences for life, a gift from the local council.

Priscilla is still in touch with the two fishermen. “André calls me every few weeks,” she says, “to ask how everyone is. Then he hangs up, and calls again later. Or he asks for a photo. They’re both really fond of the children. And they call him Uncle André. The two men only heard later that evening that all was well, and both have been left with mild trauma. There they are fishing, and suddenly they pull out a cargo bike. Rosalien, too: she was just off to see her horse and all of sudden she found herself having to resuscitate a baby.”

In all, the rescue lasted a matter of minutes. Long enough to drown, but so short that everything passes in a flash. But the aftermath has left a bitter taste. Shortly after the accident, the police received a report that Priscilla had deliberately driven the children into the water. Henk, André and Priscilla were all originally treated as suspects and had to tell their stories again and again, at the scene and at the hospital, before officers were satisfied that this was nothing more than a tragic accident and no-one was responsible.

Henk: "When the accident occurred, I didn't see anybody else there. I know that for certain – 100 per cent sure."

André: "People say that Priscilla was playing with her phone."

Henk: "But that was still in her bag."

Almost everyone had an opinion about the incident. Four children on a cargo bike driven into a river – it is the kind of story which arouses people's worst fears. The wildest accusations were levelled at Priscilla. The tabloids published salacious reports about her, complete with her full name. Their online comments sections and social media were awash with allegations from people who had been nowhere near the scene of the accident. Priscilla ended up telling her side of the story twice in the media, even though she would rather have remained anonymous. "I was shocked by the media," she says. "And I won't be posting anything on Facebook ever again. You read things like, 'She did it deliberately – she deserves to die'. People can say such harsh things without knowing anything about what happened. The best coaches are always in the stands."

Priscilla had plans to become a foster parent, but they have been put on ice. And she can no longer face riding a cargo bike. "I can talk about it easily enough now, but the bad dreams still come back at night. Whenever I hear an ambulance, it gives me shivers down my spine. My eldest daughter is the same. She talks about the accident every day, because we hear sirens every day in our neighbourhood. But we want her to grow up without trauma. To be able to just go to the pool when she wants, in a cargo bike if necessary. Fortunately, things are getting better."

There is hardly any contact with the parents of the other children. André suspects that they still bear a grudge. "So be it," he says. "But I admire Priscilla. Her presence of mind kept that bike at the surface in deep water. Fantastic, I say!"

"We cried, we laughed and we drank"

AMSTERDAM, NOORD HOLLAND, 9 FEBRUARI 2016

Rescuers: Ruben Abrahams, Wietse Mol, Reinier Bosch and Rienk Kentie

Rescued: anonymous

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WHEN THE WOMAN GOT OUT OF HER CAR, IT JUST ROLLED AWAY with her three-year-old daughter inside. The driver, who prefers to remain anonymous, had just parked on Sloterkade in Amsterdam, next to a canal. Now she could see her car gliding towards the water. In a flash, she jumped back in to be with her child. At least that way the toddler would not end up in the water alone. As she grabbed the girl, she could already see some men swimming around the car. She heard them trying to pry open the door and smash the windows, and then she felt water streaming in. As soon as the rear window gave way, she handed her daughter to a rescuer and then also swam through the opening – still clutching her handbag and car key, because you never know. Seconds later, the car sank.

The whole drama was captured on a video made by bystanders. We see the car floating in the waters of De Schinkel, an important and therefore deep navigation route through Amsterdam. It is dusk, so the lights of a nearby shop are shining brightly. Men swim towards the car from all sides.

Reinier was inside the shop when he heard a woman calling from the street that there was a car in the water. He ran outside, where someone handed him a paving stone, and was the first in the water. Ruben was sitting in his office on the opposite bank of the canal and was alerted by a colleague. He had seen a car go into the water once before. That time, three people had died. He was not going to let that happen again. So he grabbed a hammer and jumped into the water. Rienk was working nearby and heard a commotion outside. As a member of his company's in-house emergency response team, he felt duty-bound to act and rushed outside. Wietse had been standing next to Reinier in the shop, and followed him into the water after fetching a rescue hammer from his own car.

The four men converged on the car. Reinier's paving stone and Ruben's claw hammer proved ineffective. Wietse swam round to the passenger side and saw mother and daughter sitting there. The little girl looked him straight in the eye. "Only then did I realise how serious this was," he says. "At first you don't think of death or anything like that. My first thought was, 'Something like this happens every two weeks here, and this time we're the ones helping'. I was trying to open the door but because of the pressure of the water my hands got caught in it. I couldn't free them and I thought, 'Shit, I'm going to go down with the car'. By the time I freed myself, fortunately the child was already out. I said something like 'Thank God!' to Ruben, but he said the mother was still inside.

"You act instinctively," says Rienk. "So much could have gone wrong. Suppose we'd smashed the front windscreen and the car had suddenly filled with water and sunk because that's where the engine is, the heaviest part. Eventually, the mother emerged. In the end, all I rescued was her handbag." Rienk realises now that a special rescue hammer is essential in this kind of situations. "An ordinary hammer or a stone – they're useless."

The quay was very busy by now. Hundreds of onlookers and dozens of emergency workers were watching the rescue effort. Back on dry land, the rescuers were given dry towels, new clothes and coffee and cake by concerned staff from the nearby shop. The police took telephone numbers and contact details. The victim's husband had rushed to the scene and gave her rescuers a quick embrace before saying that he wanted to be with his wife.

Rienk decided to go back to work, but skipped football training that evening. He was tired and emotionally affected by the incident. But the phone kept on ringing. Local television aired an item on the rescue and national talk show RTL Late Night invited the men on as heroes. "This doesn't happen very often in life," says Ruben, "so we said, 'Bring it on'. In Germany we appeared on some TV spectacular, which was wonderful. Portugal, Thailand, India, Brazil... our story was everywhere. When our video went viral in France, all these beautiful French girls wanted to make friends on Facebook." Wietse laughs. On the evening of RTL Late Night, he had his second date with a new girlfriend. "So there she is in the audience while I'm sitting at the table as a so-called hero! That worked pretty well: we're still together." After making an impassioned plea for motorists to carry rescue hammers, Rienk was sent dozens of them. He will never have to buy another one.

Thanks to the media circus and the events which brought them together, the four men still meet up from time to time for a few beers. A couple of months after the incident, they sang together at Rienk's wedding. Their meetings are always something special. But they can also put things into perspective. "We're riding the wave, but 'heroes' is a big word. Anyone would have done the same. Then everyone would be a hero. What did surprise us were the tenacity and fanaticism of the media. The efforts they made to try to contact the rescued family through us, even though they really didn't want any publicity, were extremely annoying."

Shortly after the incident, the husband of the rescued woman created a WhatsApp group entitled Heroes! "I'm looking after my wife and child right now," he wrote, "but I'll contact you again soon." A few days later came another message, saying that he was an amateur cook and wanted to make them a meal. Which he later did.

"I felt intense guilt," recalls the rescued woman. Her husband quickly steps in. "At the time, we lived nearby and I was alerted by the police. I'll never forget that moment, when they came to the door.

I felt a sudden chill and started to sweat. It's something you never want to experience. I ran to the shop where it was all going on and there she was, standing there. She apologised immediately. But she's not to blame, whatever happened! She's a hero, too! She went back into the car to be with her daughter, even though it was sliding into the water. Other people would have been paralysed with fear. And then retrieved our daughter from the child seat, which is also difficult, and put her on her lap."

When the media erupted, the family decided to stay out of the limelight. "Let the rescuers take all the honours and credit. We just wanted the story to fade away. The incident itself was bad enough. We told select friends and family about it, but asked them to be discreet."

A while later, the time was right for the promised dinner. Five courses with a selection of wines and exquisite snacks. "It was an amazing evening," remembers the husband. "For us it was the first time we could talk about the incident so openly. It felt so familiar, as if we'd known them for years, and it was also important for them that they could see our daughter. We just told her that they were friends of ours, not that they were the people who'd rescued her. We didn't talk about the accident until she was in bed. I could see that they were relieved that our daughter was skipping around, totally unconcerned. That my darling wife was there in the flesh, alive and well, and that I'd recovered from the shock. That was good."

"We cried, we laughed and we drank," says Ruben. "It was just beautiful. We found out that we all had different versions of what happened, and each of us had pieces of the puzzle the others were missing. So that dinner had the unintended consequence that the puzzle was complete by the end of the evening."

"If life is a book, then this is an important chapter," Ruben concludes. "Perhaps because I live very near where it happened. Just two weeks ago I was offered a beer because of it, so I'm reminded regularly of the incident. It's not every day that you receive a fantastic award from the mayor, either. It does give me a warm feeling that thanks to my actions, and those of three other people, a woman and a child are still alive today. It doesn't occupy me on a daily basis, but it is an important event in my life."

“I’ll never get out of this alive”

N361 TUSSEN GENEMUIDEN EN IJSSELMUIDEN, OVERIJSEL,
2 FEBRUARI 2015

Rescuers: Albert and Kevin ten Kley

Rescued: Helen van Dijk

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“MY MOTHER HAD WARNED ME IT MIGHT BE SLIPPERY”, says Helen. “She had just come back from her night shift and I was going to go off to my work placement in her car.” Helen is sitting on the sofa at her parents’ house, a modern and minimalist home on the edge of Genemuiden. With her hand, she retraces the route she drove that morning, along Kamperzeedijk towards Almere. “I thought I was driving carefully. At one point I took a sharp bend and I felt my wheels skid slightly. So yes, it was slippery. I corrected my steering, just a little bit, but that only made things worse. The car was sliding from one side of the road to the other. I did everything I could to stay on that road, because it runs next to a canal. But it didn’t help: it was as smooth as an ice rink. I finally lost control and hit the kerb, crossed the cycle path, went up the dyke, down the other side and into the canal. Because I was doing almost 80 kilometres an hour, I hit the water with quite a splash. At that point, I’d completely lost the plot. Fortunately, I was uninjured. But because the car had plunged into the water front first, I was hanging forward with my seatbelt pushing against my chest.”

It was dark, early on a winter’s morning. The water was freezing, and flowing into the car from all sides. “Everything went black. I thought, ‘I’ll never get out of this alive’. I couldn’t see a thing and I couldn’t do anything. That was really frightening. I tried to undo the seatbelt, but the darkness and the panic had totally disoriented me. My feet were already in the water. Then I saw the light from the radio, and from that I was able to work out where my belt was fastened. That was how I managed to free myself. The car was lying at an angle in the water, and I reckoned that I had the best chance of escape from the passenger side. That was the only place where I could see a strip of light. Looking back, I wonder how I was able to think all that and do all that. I wound the window down a bit and screamed like crazy for help. In the distance, a cyclist had stopped – I could see the light from his headlamp. ‘Why are you just standing there and not doing anything?’ I thought to myself.”

That morning, father Albert and son Kevin had been a little late getting up and having breakfast. So Albert decided to drive Kevin from their home in IJsselmuiden to school in nearby Genemuiden. As they turned the bend by the pumping station and saw Genemuiden looming in the distance, a huge plume of water rose into the air right in front of them. Albert stopped the car and they both got out.

Kevin: “I said, ‘Dad, what are we going to do?’ He said, ‘We’re going in’. So we took off our shoes and jackets, put down our phones and my dad jumped into the water. Dived in, really, because he went straight under. That meant he immediately had real trouble breathing, because it was four degrees below freezing. He was on the driver’s side, pulling at the door, but it wouldn’t open. Then I swam and slid over the bonnet to the other side and there she was, screaming. Somehow I managed to lift her out of the car. I really don’t know how, because it was pretty deep. I dragged her to the bank and asked if there was anyone else in the car, but she didn’t answer. I started swimming back, but then heard I her shouting that there was no-one there. Once I reached the bank again, I got out of the water as quickly as I could.”

“Just as I was yelling at that cyclist,” Helen remembers, “Kevin’s head suddenly popped up beside me.” In the darkness and her own panic, she had not even noticed that someone was already trying to free her from the other side of the car. “Kevin looked at me like this and said, ‘Come on’. That was pretty intense.” As she recounts the story, Helen is back in the cold water again. Tears roll down her cheeks.

Helen: “Once we were all on the bank, they swam back again. I thought, ‘Don’t be silly – it’s cold, come out!’ It was so terribly cold and they’d been swimming all that time to save me. Afterwards you think, ‘Whatever possessed them to try to save someone in such cold water?’ Anyway, Albert put me in their van and gave me warm overalls. Kevin’s zip was stuck, so he was standing there in the cold with a bare chest. Then my father arrived to pick me up. He’d already been called by an acquaintance who had recognised me. I was home within fifteen minutes. I showered and spent the rest of the day in my pyjamas. I was completely exhausted. It was like having really bad flu, very strange. It makes you dead tired. I couldn’t concentrate on anything for weeks afterwards.”

That same evening, Helen and her parents went to see Kevin and Albert. “That was really weird,” she says, “because my mother got into the back of the car and my father into front passenger seat. ‘What’s the meaning of this?’ I asked. To which my father replied, ‘You’re going to drive’. ‘I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘Yes you are,’ he said. So I had to drive that same road, in the dark again. At every bend I had the idea that I was going to skid off again, that the car would do the same as it had done that morning. That fear still comes back regularly when I’m driving, especially when it’s raining or snowing or very dark outside.”

Helen has a huge admiration for Albert and Kevin. “If only everyone were like them, prepared to risk their own life to jump into the water. Somewhere in a newspaper interview Albert said that he now knows what it means to be breathtakingly cold. And Kevin wasn’t even 16. But he found some kind of primal strength to pull me out of that car and haul me to dry land, without even having solid ground under his feet.”

Father Albert remembers that they did everything in a daze. “We had an adrenalin rush. We didn’t think about it. You just go in – it’s do it and keep going and nothing else. And don’t stop until you’ve got her out.” When Kevin asked what we were going to do, I thought, ‘Are we just going to stand here – you hear that often enough – and look on?’ I don’t have it in my heart to do that – we couldn’t.”

While Helen was being rushed home by her father, Albert and Kevin were talking to the emergency services. “Never do that again,” the paramedics told Albert when he mentioned his dive into the water. Then they went home to take a shower and to call work and school to say they were taking the day off. No-one believed their excuse. But news of their heroism was already spreading. In the village that afternoon, Kevin’s mother heard the most incredible stories. When he did finally return to school, her son was hailed as a hero. He suddenly had his choice of work-placement offers. “I even owe my current job to that incident. It was so long ago, but they still knew my story.”

“We believe in God,” says Albert, “and I think He had a hand in all this. Normally, we would have passed that point much earlier but we’d forgotten something and had to go back home for it. Then we were held up by a slow van in front of us. As a result, we drove round that bend at exactly the right moment and saw her shoot into the canal.”

Albert and Kevin have little contact with Helen, but they follow what she is doing on Facebook. And every year on 2 February she writes on their timeline that they are heroes and always will be. “That’s nice to read,” says Kevin. For weeks after the accident, their house was awash with flowers. Everyone greeted them in the street. They were honoured wherever they went. They even had to empty out a liquorice jar to put flowers in – everything else was full. “We were called heroes,” Albert declares, “but in fact we were simply in the right place at the right time.”

“They had drunk far too much”

TEXEL, NOORD HOLLAND, 7 MAART 2013

Rescuers: Erik Mus and Desiree Krijthe

Rescued: unknown

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AT THE FAR END OF KIKKERTSTRAAT IN DE COCKSDORP, the northernmost village on the island of Texel, live Erik and Desiree. From their house, within a minute you are standing on the dyke holding back the Wadden Sea. But if you turn right before reaching that dyke, you come across a system of creeks, ditches and drainage channels that remind us of when the sea still had free rein here. This is where Erik and Desiree walk their boisterous dog. And where, on a dark winter’s evening, they rescued four men from an overturned car. All thanks to the dog, who wanted to go out much earlier than usual. “If he hadn’t needed a pee, they’d be dead now,” says Erik.

That rescue, it’s quite a stupid story, he continues. “They came back to see us after it was all over. One of them did the all talking, and they gave us a bunch of flowers and a gift token. The rest of them kept their eyes fixed on the floor. They were really ashamed. They were Frisians who were here for a construction job on the island. They’d drunk too much in the pub near here. The landlady was already collecting her car keys to take them home, but they insisted that they could make it back by themselves. Fifteen minutes later she heard sirens and one of her staff was summoned by the volunteer fire brigade. She knew straight away what had happened. It’s really not something those lads can be proud of, so we understand why they weren’t at the medal ceremony.”

Driven crazy by the dog scratching at the door, Desiree eventually gave in and took him out to walk their usual route. “There is a cycle path next to the road, and I normally walk there. But this time I was walking at the side of the road itself. That was when I saw a car swerving across the little bridge from the village and onto the cycle path. They just drove straight onto it, still swerving, and then suddenly I saw the headlights shoot to the right. ‘What kind of idiots are they,’ I thought. There’s a bridge over the canal a bit further up the road, but I realised they hadn’t gone that far. Then it hit home what had

actually happened. I rushed home as fast as I could, with the dog at my side. 'Erik!' I shouted, 'There's a car in the water'. Erik had just arrived home from a three-day naval exercise and he was completely exhausted. But he knew immediately that this was serious. He threw on his clothes and jumped into our Dodge pick-up, one of those big ones with lights on the roof."

Meanwhile, the car was lying in the cold water. Upside down, but floating. It looked as if there was no-one inside. Erik switched on the floodlights on the pick-up and jumped into the water. "That first moment was strange," he recalls. "I couldn't see anyone, and of course the door handles worked the other way around. I was unable to open them quickly. I was making a bit of a mess of it when suddenly I heard a cry for help coming from the car. One of the men was still conscious. He had climbed into the back. I took him to the canal bank and he just sat there. I asked him how many people were in the car, but he didn't seem to know. He mumbled something about three or four. So I went in again and pulled out another one, who I also brought to the bank, where the first victim lifted him out of the water. He half came round, but wasn't exactly lucid. Then I ducked again and pulled out a third one. He was already unconscious. I carried him to the bank, too, where the others took over. After that third one I realised that if the car was upside down, the driver would be sitting on the other side. So that was where I had to go."

It must have been a frightening scene, but also an odd one: three dazed men lined up on the bank of that chilly canal in the pitch dark, but illuminated by the lights on the pick-up. Desiree was on the line to the emergency operator throughout. The fire brigade, police and ambulance were on their way and she provided updates on the situation. The three men Erik had rescued were suffering from hypothermia and shock. They could do nothing to help, Erik and Desiree realised. When Erik started looking for the driver, they said drily, "Oh, he's already dead".

Erik again waded through the water and tugged at the driver, a heavy man. "I had to pull damned hard. At first I only had hold of his coat, but after a while he followed – a really big bloke. He'd stopped moving. I thought he was dead. Two of men on the bank weren't helping at all. The third was in the water, but also doing nothing, so there I was on my own with that heavy guy. With great difficulty I managed to reach the bank with him, too, but I almost had to throw him onto it. Fortunately, I heard him snoring and so there was still a sign of life. I laid him on his side, with his head on a group of stones as support. And then I pushed the third man back to land, as well."

"At times like this," says Erik, "it helps that I'm a marine. I'd been in an incredibly deep sleep, but I've been trained to wake up within a second and be ready with my kit. I also know how hypothermia works – you learn that on exercise in Norway. How many minutes you keep going and what happens to you after that. I acted fast and well. But looking back, I also made mistakes. I usually have an axe, rope and knife in the car, but I forgot them. I should have brought blankets, too. But acting quickly and thinking about your own safety, those are the most important things in a rescue of this kind. I was extremely angry with those men on the bank. They did nothing and left each other to rot. If they were my friends, I wouldn't be proud of them."

The cold, the darkness and the speed with which Erik and Desiree acted so effectively earned them the Society's gold medal, a rare distinction. Erik also received a special award from the Navy for personnel who perform acts of heroism off duty in civilian society.

Erik left for home as soon as possible after the fire brigade arrived. He wanted to take a hot shower, and above all to sleep. "I'd been busy with boats all week and it had been bloody cold," he laughs. "Maybe that's why I didn't dwell on it too much, or perhaps it was because those other men hadn't helped. At any rate, once in bed I fell asleep again straight away. The next day I was back at work at the barracks, on time too."

"If I'm honest," he continues, "I never think about it any more. It's over. But I do now know that, when it comes down to it, I can act fast enough and I won't just stand look on. But in fact I already knew that because of my job."

Desiree, by contrast, is a little disappointed with herself. "When I was at the pumping station, I thought, 'Oh Jesus, what am I going to find. We're going to have to resuscitate people'. At one point I really thought I heard children in the car. That really scared me and I didn't like the fact that that's what it was doing to me. I always thought I'd act quickly in a situation like that, but I wasn't that fast at all."

Erik is happy that it all ended well. "Imagine reaching that car but not being able to open the door, so that four people drown in front of your eyes. I think you'd feel different for the rest of your life. When you go into such a rescue, you always run the risk of failure. That is something I think about. We've really been well-rewarded for our efforts and for saving four lives. If it had been three, that would also have been good, but then there would have been a death as well."

