

# FROM

Industrial Firefighting

# NEW YORK

# to Rotterdam

Exploring ocean-rowing preparation, setbacks and goals, Kees Kappetijn details TataSteel IJmuiden Industrial Fire Brigade Commander Chris van Amersfoort's charity-driven expedition from the US to the Netherlands

**F**irefighter Chris van Amersfoort does not shy away from major challenges. He is the commander of the Dutch industrial fire brigade at TataSteel IJmuiden, one of the world's leading steel factories. It's a work environment with unique challenges, as at TataSteel, everything is large, tall, heavy, and above all, hot. Together with the head of the response team and the head of prevention, Chris ensures the readiness and deployability of the brigade.

Aside from firefighting, he has a second passion: endurance sports, particularly rowing. His greatest dream is a non-stop rowing trip across the Atlantic Ocean from New York to Rotterdam, to raise sponsorship funds for a good cause. In May 2024, this expedition took shape. Together with two former marines and a nurse, he embarked on the massive journey. An operation that, like firefighting, nursing, and military practice, relies on thorough preparation, tight planning, and teamwork.

Unfortunately, after thirteen days on the turbulent Atlantic, the team had to acknowledge defeat. But new opportunities await.

The first idea for the ocean rowing trip emerged in 2011 when Chris, who was a member of a 'sloop rowing club,' met some ocean rowers who had already completed such an epic journey. "Since then, I've also dreamed of such an expedition," Chris recalls. "But you need a seaworthy rowing boat for that. And a team of rowers who can take on such a task together.

"A first attempt by a group of Rotterdam police officers eventually didn't materialise due to the two-year-long COVID pandemic. I was a reserve rower in that team. After the pandemic, I decided to take the initiative myself; by then, a foundation for preparation was already in place. Three enthusiastic former marines, John Opmeer, Marcel Nijland, and Paul Kuiphof, and a social psychiatric nurse, Gerhard ter Maat, dared to take on the challenge."

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**"While I've resumed my work, I'm quietly thinking about another opportunity to row across an ocean in the near future."**

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### Alexia

New team, same goal: to raise sponsorship money for expanding family rooms at the Ronald McDonald House at the Erasmus Sophia Children's Hospital in Rotterdam. A noble goal, which for Chris was the driving force to make his long-held dream a reality. That was the start of the process

of planning, attracting sponsors, training, and arranging materials and logistics. A special ten-meter-long ocean rowing boat made of carbon fibre was built for the team, with a tiny cabin on each side for sleeping and resting. Not a vessel for people with claustrophobia or fear of water and also a mental and psychological challenge.

The team members would have to endure each other for 70 to 80 days, the expected travel time, on those few square meters, surrounded by nothing but thousands of miles of water. The boat was named 'Alexia,' after the Dutch princess of the same name, but also after the Greek word for 'protector' or 'helper.' For eighty days, the boat would be the only shield protecting Chris and his rowing mates from the elements.

### Preparation

In addition to a very special seaworthy, sleek rowing boat that must remain afloat and right itself after capsizing, much more preparation was required. The planning, logistical preparation, and training closely resembled the preparation for a prolonged tactical rescue operation. How do you physically and mentally prepare a team of rowers for an 80-day non-stop rowing trip over 6,000 kilometres?

Chris tells: "The team size and rowing schedule are crucial for the success of the journey. We sought advice from an online community of ocean rowers. In the case of a team consisting of four people, you have two rowers alternating in a schedule of two hours of rowing and two hours of sleeping.

"Two hours of rowing effort is manageable without becoming exhausted, and the (almost) two hours of sleep that follow are enough to regain energy for the next two-hour shift. It's a very strict schedule with six rowing blocks and six rest blocks per day, but it has been tested by various teams. With strict discipline, you should be able to maintain that rhythm for 80 days." ▶



Chris van Amersfoort, Fire Chief at Tata IJmuiden, team member in the boat

With this schedule in mind, the team members trained for months. At the same time, logistics and equipment were organised, including navigation equipment, personal care and hygiene materials, first aid supplies, non-perishable meals, and equipment to turn seawater into drinking water.

Provisions were stocked to last a maximum of one hundred days—'Plan-plus,' just in case. Chris says: "We had to be completely self-sufficient, as we were not accompanied by a support boat with provisions and aid. That made this venture extra special. It's a challenge in itself, as to date, only about forty Dutch people have successfully completed an ocean rowing journey. This is truly top-tier endurance."

### The journey

After months of preparation and waiting for the right weather report, the team arrived in New York on May 1, 2024, for the final stage of preparation: loading equipment and supplies onto the boat and conducting final checks. On May 8, the big moment arrived; after a total of three years of preparation, the Alexia and her brave rowing team set out to sea. Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty became small specks on the horizon, and through the Upper Bay and Lower Bay of the Hudson River's mouth, the boat found itself on the 'open water.' The crossing of several busy shipping lanes heading toward

New York Harbor added a bit of suspense. Thanks to a digital beacon, the small rowing boat was visible on navigation screens for the ocean giants, but sometimes direct radio contact was needed to ensure a safe passage.

**“A ten-meter-long ocean rowing boat made of carbon fibre was built for the team, with tiny cabins for sleeping and resting.”**

Once on the open sea, the boat did receive some company—though not from another vessel, but from various marine life swimming nearby. A pod of dolphins stayed close for days, playfully darting around the boat, curiously inspecting the crew members aboard this strange object. A shark also made an appearance, but there were no dangerous encounters. On several occasions, the crew spotted the spray of a whale spout on the horizon. These were unforgettable experiences on a journey that, in the first few days alone, was marked by a mix of calm periods and turbulent moments with rough seas and long, towering waves.

### Unwanted rescue

The rough seas would significantly impact the further progress of the expedition and eventually take their toll. After ten days, the team had to make a difficult but inevitable decision: return to New York. Chris explains: "Shortly after departure, two crew members began suffering from seasickness. One of them recovered after a few days due to acclimatisation, but the second remained sick, except for a few brief moments when the sea was calm."



10-meter carbon boat, light but unsinkable

“After ten days of seasickness and frequent vomiting, which also made the seasickness pills ineffective, our crewmate’s health became a concern. Eventually, dehydration and organ failure can occur, leading to death. It was clear that he would only recover with solid ground under his feet, but that wasn’t possible.

“With another 60 to 70 days and more than five thousand kilometres ahead, we, as a team, decided that continuing was irresponsible. It would also be a very difficult operation, as our sick companion was unable to row. With one team of two rowers and one individual rower, you simply have less rowing power, which would also make the crossing take even more time. We had no choice: we had to turn back.”

## “The goal was to raise sponsorship money for expanding family rooms at the Ronald McDonald House at the Erasmus Sophia Children’s Hospital in Rotterdam.”

That was easier said than done, as the warm Gulf Stream, which the boat had reached by day thirteen and which was supposed to give the team a push towards Europe, now worked against them. The boat barely moved forward against the current and the strong westerly winds that had picked up. This situation led to a second critical decision: calling the US Coast Guard for an ‘evacuation.’ The Coast Guard issued a call to nearby ships to assist, and a ‘RoRo ship’ carrying agricultural vehicles responded.

Within an hour, the ocean-going vessel pulled up alongside the rowboat, and the options were



Leaving Staten Island during daylight with fine weather

discussed via radio. The crew could climb aboard the RoRo ship via a rope ladder, but rescuing the rowboat was not an option. If the ship were to tow the rowboat behind it, the boat would be completely destroyed.

As a result, Chris and his colleagues had to make a third difficult decision: to abandon their valuable boat with all its equipment and supplies. But there was no other choice. Climbing aboard the freighter was far from risk-free due to the large swells, but eventually, all rowers made it aboard safely. Rarely had a rescue been so ‘unwanted,’ as the ocean adventure was now officially over.

Disappointed, the four travelled back to the Netherlands from New York. However, there was eventually some good news. Thanks to the digital navigation beacon that was still working, the team was able to track the boat. The vessel had drifted toward Canada, not too far off the coast of Nova Scotia.

After some research into shipping and fishing companies in the area, the rowers found a fishing crew willing to perform a ‘salvage operation.’ It didn’t come free, so a price was negotiated, and the agreements were sealed in a contract. The salvage of the boat was successful, and aboard another ship headed for Europe, the ocean rowboat returned safely to the Netherlands.



Tata Steel, striving for the best performance

Chris: “Salvaging our boat cost a substantial sum of money, but the value of the boat and all the equipment and supplies on board is worth many times that amount. By selling the boat and all those materials to other ocean rowing teams, we can still achieve our ultimate goal; the funds for expanding rooms at the Ronald McDonald House will be realised.

“But in the meantime, I still dream of that great crossing. While I’ve resumed my work at Tata Steel IJmuiden’s industrial fire brigade, I’m quietly thinking about another opportunity to row across an ocean in the near future. It could be the (North) Atlantic Ocean, but the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are also fine. I’ve already been approached about it. One day, I will succeed!”

For those seeking further information or with questions about the journey, Chris van Amersfoort can be reached via email at [Chris.Amersfoort@tatasteelurope.com](mailto:Chris.Amersfoort@tatasteelurope.com). ■