

THE LAST TIME THE MI AMIGO ENGINE WENT ON

During the second weekend of March several people from several countries will get together on a certain secret location in London to take part in a reunion of former Radio Caroline and Radio Mi Amigo deejays and crewmembers, who have worked on the MV Mi Amigo during the period



1975-1980. Of course a lot of memories will be shared during that meeting, but on forehand also things from the past, a lot almost forgotten, came up. I exchanged e mails with former Mi Amigo deejay Marc Jacobs and one subject which came heavily back was the problems with the MV Mi Amigo, due to the heavy weather in September 1976. A heavy storm which brought the Grand Old Lady in severe problems, probably the heaviest since 1966.

Let's go back to the Friday, September 10th when the whole of England and Holland were in the very stormy weather. On the North sea, twenty miles of the British coast, the storm was so heavy that the people on the MV Mi Amigo were thinking they had to deal with a hurricane. During the morning, when the force of the waves lashing the



vessel shattered one of the portholes, the one of the upstairs studio in use by Radio Mi Amigo. Water came with heavy loads into the studio and as a result the Dutch programmes were put off the air due to the sodden state of this studio. Later we learnt that water was six inches high in the room. The records in the racks got also a lot of water and when the storm became heavier the racks broke partly down with the result that the records went into the water on the floor. Lucky enough downstairs in the ship, where the Caroline studio was situated, they had – at that stage – no problems with the water level. However, due to fact the ship was heavy rolling playing music from records was impossible and therefore special non stop storm tapes were put on air. What we, as listeners, didn't know was that the Mi Amigo had drifted on a sandbank.

But also the signal coming from the transmitter was not a normal one as the transmitter was cutting out several times, even once for twenty long minutes. So around 9.45 CET in the morning the Caroline crew decided that the studio could be taken over by the Mi Amigo boys. Peter Chicago went to the transmitter room and linked the two transmitters in parallel and the sound of Radio Mi Amigo, which was bringing in the money, could be heard on 259 as well as on 192 metres. First the

daily taped program between 11 and 12 from Playa de Aro, which was called 'Stan Haag Vandaag', which was followed by the news in Dutch read by Marc Jacobs, in which he also thanked the Caroline guys for using their studio, then Radio Mi Amigo went off the air.

More than 30 years on Marc Jacobs remembers: 'The Old Lady drifted onto a sandbank and the weather was so rough, that the waves came over the ship, leaving us actually under water every time a wave came over. We were still on air that morning from the Mi Amigo studio. Suddenly a huge wave broke the porthole in the Mi Amigo studio. I was in there and the splintered glass was all over and in my face. The Gates mixer started to give funny sounds as all the valves inside blew apart. The studio equipment was covered in seawater and Radio Mi Amigo went off the air. I was cleared of the glass in my face, no real injuries, and after about an hour Radio Mi Amigo continued broadcasting from the Caroline studio. I told our listeners what had happened and I think we stayed on the air for a few hours more. By noon we had taken in so much water, that it was unsafe to keep the generators running so we went of the air.'



The Caroline deejays thought it shouldn't be a problem to go on the air in the evening and so the station took to the airwaves at 19.00 CET with Ed



Foster telling what had happened earlier that day. So the English listeners heard that the porthole had broken and the Mi Amigo studio was totally soaked, including Marc Jacobs. What he however didn't tell his listeners was that the anchor chain had broken. It was around 20.30, the day before, that the good old Mi Amigo ran aground a sandbank. Captain Werner de Zwart asked Ed Foster to send out an SOS message, which he did by interrupting a record at 20.35 hours that evening: ' This is Radio Caroline broadcasting on 259 metres in the medium wave band from the radio-ship Mi Amigo. We are on a sandbank and in distress and require assistance from shore.'

Although the captain is always in charge on a ship it was Peter Chicago who stopped the SOS calls after twice broadcasted. Ed Foster later remembered: "The captain is always the boss on a ship and so he told me to broadcast to shore requesting for assistance. I'd repeated the SOS twice and

suddenly it was Peter Chicago bursting into the studio and told me immediately to stop the SOS calls as he thought, as responsible man for the radio-crew, that we were not in immediate danger.”



During that Friday evening, September 10th, strange enough programming went on without any of the Caroline deejays talking about the earlier mentioned problems. At 22.00 Mark Lawrence took over and at 1.00 o'clock Saturday morning the 11th it was

Tom Anderson taking over for his show. Shipping weather forecast from the BBC was monitored late in the evening by Buster Pearson: “Southerly gale, force nine, Imminent, Thames Estuary. I could make only one conclusion that after a day of gales and another storm on his way with the ship – as mentioned in the SOS – on a sandbank, that this could only mean that the Mi Amigo and their crew was in a most precarious position.”

Buster stayed on the main part of the night and made a logging of what happened



that night, in his home in South Benfleet (Essex): ‘ At approximately 00.40, the 192 meter transmitter went off the air; hours later than usual. As we listened to Tom

Anderson we could clearly hear his chair sliding around. Also we could hear the regular clanging of the broken anchor chain as it struck again and again against the steel hull of the radio-ship. We could also hear records tumbling out of their racks and the noises built up in intensity, showing that the storm was reaching it's climax.'

It must have been around 3.30 CET that night that the lights at the 31 Avondale Road could be switched of as seven minutes earlier the transmitter on the Mi Amigo, which was still on at 259 metres, went totally suddenly silent, not to come back. It was Ed Foster who later told what was happening around that time on the Mi Amigo: ' The breakdown in the night was caused by the feeder from the transmitter to the mast cross-bar being snapped off by the wind, a break that couldn't be fixed without the help of a welding team.'

There was only one newspaper, the Daily Mirror, who mentioned in a short article the next day about the problems on the Mi Amigo: ' Pop, on the rocks. Pop pirate Radio Caroline sent out an S.O.S. yesterday, after it's ship went aground off Clacton. Disc-



jockeys continued broadcasting from the vessel, which is normally anchored outside territorial limits.' Buster was at the British side in contact with several people and informed me that he had no idea if the ship had a total other position as a spokesman from the coast guard in Walton on the Naze had informed him that there was no noticeable change in the Mi Amigo's usual position.

It stayed silent on both frequencies for several days. But silence didn't mean that nothing was happening on board the MV Mi Amigo; in fact, at the time when the transmitter left the air the excitement had hardly started; for on Saturday morning, when a boat pulled up alongside to offer assistance, the Captain Werner de Zwart, his crew and the Radio Mi Amigo deejays Marc Jacobs as well as Jan van De Meer were leaving the ship, heading for the Belgian coast. That left the four Englishmen from Radio Caroline alone on the ship: Ed Foster, Tom Anderson, Peter Chicago and Mark Lawrence. And although the station was not on the air anymore, there was no time to rest. In stead of that they had to work very hard to keep the ship afloat. Many buckets were filled with water as many parts of the boat were several feet deep in water.



In the week after the ship stranded it was the late Ronald 'C' Pearson who remembered the stranding of the MV Mi Amigo in 1966 compared to the one in 1976: 'When the ship beached once before on Frinton Beach, she chose the only stretch of shore and the only point on that stretch where she could set down without landing right over a concrete breakwater. She brought the same survival-instinct into play again when she choose her sandbank. She landed right in between the remains of two wrecks; had she been forced onto the wrecks just a few feet to either side of the resting position, she could not have avoided being broken up by then. So once again she played her part again, like way back in 1966, in saving the persons on board the

radio ship. After that four of the deejays had the faith to stay aboard and save the lady. They worked very hard aboard her and gradually getting her dried out.'

One of the English deejays, Ed Foster remembered the hours after the Captain and others left the ship: "For hours we hauled buckets until Peter rigged up a pump. This was kept going night and day; but the hose had no filter and we were constantly wading around, cleaning out the paper and muck that choked the hose. A very nasty and messy job, but one which prevented 'the Mi Amigo' taking in enough water to burst her seams and sink."



But the pump and the buckets and the enormous input from the four on the ship were not enough and so contact was taken with the organisation asking for assistance from a welding team. The danger wasn't over when a tender arrived with welding equipment to repair the damaged hull. The weather reports at that stage were still predicting even worse weather for the area. Only if the sea remained calm could the necessary repairs be effected and the ship saved.

In the meantime I was informed by telephone during the very early hours of Sunday



morning September 12th of the save arrival of the abandoned crew. In heavy weather one of the tenders brought them to a save harbour, were temporary accommodation was arranged for a few of them. Others decided to leave for home. I can now reveal they stayed in Oostende in Belgium for some time. It was Marc Jacobs contacting me and asking me to be contact person during their stay in Belgium. In no way they wanted to be on the phone with family neither the Mi Amigo/Caroline organisation directly. This as they were afraid their private family phones were tapped by the authorities. I could tell everybody involved some of the bad news as well as the good news and hoped that both stations would be back soon. And luck came for the Lady again.

More than 30 years later Marc Jacobs tries to recall the things happening when they abandoned the radio-ship: "What happened afterwards I can't really recall. At some point our tender managed to come alongside. There is one thing I do remember the first one to jump to safety, to leave the ship, was our captain Werner de Zwart, the coward. We, the Dutch, were forced to abandon ship too, quite against my will I remember. We were taken to Oostende in Belgium. Chicago stayed with Ed Foster,

Tom Anderson and Mark Lawrence and they in fact saved the ship, because they never stopped pumping out the water. If they hadn't stayed on the Old Lady, our story would have ended there on that sandbank in 1976.”

Ronald C Pearson told about the legend MV Mi Amigo in late September 1976: ‘Yet, the Spirit of Caroline again proved stronger than the weather! The predicted northerly gales ravaged the country, producing more havoc than many of us have ever imagined, much less seen; until they reached Cambridgeshire. Then, they reached no further. As if held back by an invisible barrier, or as if part of the North Sea had suddenly been caught up in a protective bubble wherein the

weather could have no effect, the winds died even before they reached the coast. Around ‘Caroline’, the sea remained calm. As the days passed, the Mi Amigo was repaired, towed back to her moorings and fitted with a new anchor. For, it emerges, it's not the anchor that holds the ship in position, but its chain, There should be at least twice as much chain actually on the seabed as there is stretching from the seabed to the ship. The chain that had broken had been far too short, and so had had far too much strain put on it when the ship began to move about.’ Buster





Pearson, as Ronald's nickname was, went on to tell his readers about the use of an anchor on High Seas: 'Caroline has not only a chain that is fully long enough but also a spare anchor mounted on deck where it can be dropped just by the action of cutting a rope.'

The new anchor and chain was brought to the radioship with the tender coming from a Belgian harbour. Not that the organisation had put any

money into buying a new and proper anchor and chain; no some within the Radio Mi Amigo organisation, who shared the ship with the Caroline organisation, thought they had a cheaper idea. In the eighties two guys from Holland were heavily involved in bringing Radio Caroline back on the air from a new radio ship the Ross Revenge: [Leunis Troost and Koos van Laar](#). But also in the seventies both had done a hell of a job by building a new aerial mast on the Mi Amigo on open sea. Also tendering the radio ship from illegal places was for them a normal job. As they came with their ship in several larger and smaller harbours they knew how to get the anchor and chain for free. So very simply the anchor and chain were 'lent' from a big tanker, which was chained up already for many months in a small Belgian harbour.



Marc Jacobs tried to remember coming back to the MV Mi Amigo: 'A day or two later we went back to our ship with a new anchor-chain, which turned out to be too short, cause months later that chain would break also. As our tender tried to pull the MV Mi Amigo off the sandbank it tore off part of our starboard railing. It was welded back on later. Anyway we were pulled off the sandbank, started the ships engine and on our own force headed back to our anchor-place. Halfway there the engine sort of exploded, there was a loud noise coming from the engineroom and that was the last of the ships engine; it never ran again. Our tender then towed us back. I can't remember how long that new anchor-chain held us. It was too short, in storms we would directly pull the anchor which always gave a loud noise and a shiver throughout the ship. Frightening that was. It broke early 77 or thereabouts.'



After a long silence suddenly on Thursday September 16th for the first time a signal could be heard again at 7.27 CET on 259 metres. Really they guys had thought about good songs to play as the first one was 'You're my best friend' from Queen, of course pointing to the Lady. For the next 90 minutes it was non stop music and at 9 o'clock that day. The Mi Amigo deejays had yet arrived on the Mi Amigo but only playing the cassettes with Mi Amigo programs, recorded in Playa de Aro. Spain. This went on until 19.00 hrs that evening, when Radio Caroline once again went on the air.

First deejay was Ed Foster, who opened up the service with the words: "Thank you Radio Mi Amigo for the last twelve hours of broadcasting -- this is Radio Caroline back on two five nine'. Then the first record was played on Caroline for that evening 'The boys are back in town' from the Scottish group Thin Lizzy. After the song he

came back with: 'Yes. We're back in town, Radio Caroline on 259 metres in the Medium Waveband. Most apologise for the past three or four days - or was it five days? - that were without transmissions, but we had some difficulties out here. The weather was rather rough a couple of days ago. You can probably hear the work going on still, they're welding something, I don't know quite what it is'.



And indeed in the background several noises could be heard when the microphone was on. And of course Ed and the other deejays told the Caroline listeners what had happened and told some interesting details. Almost the whole discotheque was under water and they had to dry the record covers on the radiators, which were lucky enough still working. Next to drying the covers all the records had to be cleaned up as the water had left a lot of salt on the vinyl. Without cleaning them they could not be used again on the air.



About the moment that the Mi Amigo drifted and went on the sandbank Ed Foster remembered in his program: ' One of the interesting things that happened last Friday when we went off the air the storms dragged us. onto a sandbank and we were bashing up and down on that, which, was quite painful and painful for the old radioship as well. Like to say hello to the boys, that came out to us from the Trinity House lightship thing - I think it's called 'Ready' and is registered in London. They came out and were measuring all the sand and everything, and how deep the water was at low tide around us, and that was quite interesting. They were. standing in a little dinghy that came across, and there was one guy standing with a 'piece of rope with knots an, going 'Three... three... one-and-a-half... two...' I think he was, measuring fathoms and things; but it's a bit beyond me.

Anyway, hope you're enjoying yourselves...

I must apologise for the banging, like I said before, there's repairs and welding going on. Actually I think they're welding up a gantry for launching the spare anchor, because we've got two anchors on board and it- was falling off the wall or something so they decided to weld it...'



Deep Purple was played next with the song called ' Lazy' which presumably they were not at all on board the Mi Amigo. During the then passed five days the four guys on the ship hadn't seen too much of their beds because they had to clean up the totally mess on the ship which was left by the heavy storms. Foster told his listeners that the mess-room was a total mess: 'It was actually three or four inches deep in water. One of the windows, or portholes if you prefer, got smashed and waves came through that and we had to mop up all the mess. All, the generators packed up and it was quite chaotic here for about three days".

After Ed Foster it was time for Mark Lawrence to present some hours of entertaining



and started off with ' The boys are back in town', followed by "Hello, it's us again! If you went away for your holidays to the Outer Hebrides or somewhere far away on Friday night and you -just got back today and turned on your radio you won't notice any difference. But believe me, there's a lot of things gone down since then. Oh, you've got no idea. It would make your hair curdle or your blood curl, or something". When Mark Lawrence came on one of the first things he told was why the daytime service from Caroline had not yet returned. "We had, to put not too fine a point on it, a chronic storm. It really was a bit terrible; we had a couple of windows pushed in by the waves and consequently

a lot of things got soaked in water. The 192 transmitter was one of them, so until that's repaired we're just on at night time, with Radio Mi Amigo during the day".

Hectic days formed a complete week in the life of a lady and either Buster Pearson in Benfleet nor myself in Groningen had too many sleep during those days. That night we were able to sleep, and sleep easy for the whole night, for the first time in a week: After hearing the Caroline program we knew that everyone aboard was safe; that was all that counted. And yes, the 192 metres transmitter also came on the air again and it was on Wednesday September 22nd that at 6 CET non stop music was heard for the following four hours. Next was Ed Foster, who did a show up till 11.15 hrs when the Caroline crew decided to go over to taped programs. People were still working very hard on the ship and it gave to much noise when the microphone was open. Later that day, at 16.47 CET, live programming restarted and Radio Caroline was back like nothing had happened at all.

Sources:

Freewave Media Magazine Amstelveen 1976;

Monitor Magazine Benfleet, 1976;

20 Years Radio Caroline, Hans Knot (ed) Groningen 1984.

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